●谷川 流（たにがわ ながる）
兵庫県在住。2003年、第8回スニーカー大賞〈大賞〉を『涼宮ハルヒの憂鬱』で受賞し、デビューを果たす。また、電撃文庫より『学校を出よう！』シリーズも刊行中。趣味はバイクと麻雀。人生五里霧中。今一番欲しいものは安眠マクラと機械の身体。

カバーイラスト／いとうのいぢ
カバーデザイン／中デザイン事務所

涼宮ハルヒの消失

すずみやはるひのしょうしつ

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涼宮ハルヒの消失
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The Disappearance of Suzumiya Haruhi

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Prologue

It was a cold morning. So cold that it felt like the whole world would get neatly chipped up with some nice crisp cracks if it were poked with an ice pick. Or better yet, I would lead the pack to chip this freaking cold world up.

Nevertheless, it was just natural to be cold; it was winter now. Until the Cultural Festival about a month ago, it had been so terribly hot. Then, just as it turned December, the weather chilled rapidly as if Mother Nature finally remembered, and now I experienced with this body of mine a Japan that had no Autumn this year. Don't tell me that a certain somebody mixed up a business prosperity rebus with a spell… That Siberian cold air system should just as well change its course. There is no need for it to come down every year like that.

Had the Earth's revolution period gone crazy? Whilst I walked, giving sincere concern to Mother Nature's health, I heard "Yo, Kyon!"

A frivolous guy ran up to me to pat my shoulder in a helium-light manner. It was too much of a chore to stop my tracks, so I just turned my head towards him.

"Yo, Taniguchi," I replied, turned to face forward once again, and disdainfully gazed at the summit of the distant high hill. We commute up this slope every day, so why can't they go easy on us during physical education lessons? All the physical education teachers, like Okabe our homeroom teacher, should be more concerned about the students who have to hike in order to commute every day. The teachers go by car, if I may point out.

"Why are you talking like an old coot? Stride with a brisk pace! This is great exercise! It warms you up, doesn't it? Here, look at me, I'm not even wearing a sweater. Summer is the worst, but this season is just great for me!"

It's fine to be so freaking high-spirited, but what's your basis? Share some of that with me.

Taniguchi's never-closing mouth twisted into a smile.

"The term-end tests are over! Thanks to that, we're done learning for this year. Don't you think that's way more spectacular than what's coming soon?"

The term-end tests fell indiscriminately on all students in this school, and ended just as indiscriminately. The only difference, if anything, was probably the number scribbled on the graded answer papers that were returned to students.

I recalled Mom's expression when she started worrying about my impending cram school, and my mood sunk. When we enter eleventh grade next year, our class will be divided according to our preferred college. The arts course track or the science course track? Public college or private college? The choices made my head spin.

“Who cares about that?” Taniguchi laughed away. “There are more important things to worry about, you know. Do you know what today is?”

“December 17th,” I replied. “What about it?”

“What a dumb response! You don’t even remember the special day next week which will set your heart flying?”

“Oh I see.” I realized the right answer now. “End-of-term ceremony. The winter break is definitely worth the wait.”

However, Taniguchi shot a glance at me like a small animal encountering a wildfire. “You’re not serious, are you? The date in one week! Think! The answer should pop up like that!”

“Hmm…”

I snorted and drew out a cloud of white breath.

December 24.

I knew, all right. I had already foreseen a certain somebody brewing an evil plot or hoax for next week. Even if everyone missed this, the truth never escaped my eyes. The person who spotted such events even quicker than me just sat there, behind me. She had been lamenting missing the chance at Halloween last month, and there was no doubt she would strike this time.

Well, to be honest, I already knew exactly what she was going to do.

Yesterday in the clubroom, Suzumiya Haruhi had in fact made the following announcement…

“Does anyone have plans for Christmas Eve?”

Haruhi, who threw her bag in as soon as she closed the door, looked at us contemptuously with sparkling eyes like the three stars of Orion.

The tone resounded with the unsaid implication, “You cannot possibly have any plans. I know this; that’s crystal clear, right?” She would unleash a blizzard if anyone admitted to having prior plans.

At that moment, Koizumi and I were playing a TRPG. Asahina-san, wearing her maid costume as if it were gradually becoming her normal wear, held her hands up in front of the electric stove. Nagato was reading the latest science fiction hardcover, moving only her finger and eyes.

Haruhi placed a big handbag she brought along with her schoolbag on the floor, and walked towards me. Sticking her chest up, she looked down at me and proclaimed,

“Kyon, I know you don’t have any plans whatsoever. There’s no need to ask, but I’d feel bad if I didn’t confirm it anyway, thus my question.”

A smile like that of the world’s most famous cat was drawn across her face. Giving the dice I was about to throw to Koizumi, who was smiling conspiratorially, I turned to face Haruhi.

“What if I do have plans? Answer that first.”

“So that means you don’t have any!”

Nodding self-indulgently, Haruhi took her eyes off me. Hey, stop for a moment! I still haven’t answered your question! …Well, it’s not as if this was the only time I had no plans.

“Koizumi, are you going to be on a date with your girlfriend?”

“How pleasant it would be if that were the case!”

Shaking the die on his palm, Koizumi gave a dramatic sigh. It was in fact deliberate, and stank strongly of insincerity.

“Whether it should be considered fortune or misfortune, my schedule before and after Christmas is void and empty. I have been twisting and turning alone, worrying about how I should spend the time.”

That smiling handsome face of his just spelled out LIAR. However, Haruhi drank in his story without a doubt.

“No worries! It’s the greatest of all blessings!”

Then Haruhi set sail towards the maiden maid.

“Mikuru-chan, how about you? Did anybody invite you out ‘to see the moment when rain turns to snow in the middle of the night?’ By the way, if you find anybody telling you this load of crap with a straight face, just beat the crap out of him.”

Staring at Haruhi with big, wide-open eyes, Asahina-san looked taken aback by this sudden cross-examination.

“Well, I guess so. For the moment there is nothing… Eh, middle of the night…? Ah… anyway, let me get you some tea…”

“Volcano hot, please! The herb tea from some time ago was really fabulous,”

Haruhi put down her order.

“Y—Yes! It won’t take a minute.”

Asahina-san put the kettle on the portable gas stove with a beaming face. Was making tea really that much fun?

Nodding along in satisfaction, Haruhi turned to Nagato at last.

“Yuki?”

“No.”

Nagato gave a short reply without lifting her head up from the pages.

“There you go.”

Ending the straightforward chirping conversation, Haruhi faced me again with an arrogant smile. I looked at Nagato’s pale face, her full attention to the book as if the conversation had nothing to do with her, and thought to myself, she might as well save her breath on such witty repartee. At least take some time to pretend to remember your schedule!

Haruhi held up a hand.

“The motion for a SOS Brigade Christmas party is thus passed unanimously. If there are alternatives or objections, please hand them in after the party. If I need to read them, I’ll read them.”

In other words, it was the well-known situation once again: her words would not be taken back once they were said, no matter what. It was literally just a gesture, but when compared to half a year ago, Haruhi asking everyone’s plans could be considered an improvement. Well, it’d even be better if she asked for everybody’s opinions instead of their plans.

With a face brimming with satisfaction that everything went as expected, Haruhi stuck her hand into her handbag on the floor.

“By the way, nobody can come unprepared for a season like Christmas, right? So I bought a few items. The right way to spend the season starts with mood-creating gadgets!”

Out of the bag came spray-on snow, gold and silver lace, crackers, a miniature tree, reindeer plushies, white cotton, Christmas lights, wreathes, red-and-green banners, a tapestry of the Alps, wind-up snowmen, thick candle stands, huge Christmas stockings that could hold a kindergartener, CDs of Christmas songs…

With a smiling face like a neighborhood big sister that gives children candy, Haruhi neatly placed the various Christmas-related items on the table one by one.

“I will inject festivity into this nondescript room. The introductory step towards enjoying Christmas proactively and positively starts with appearance. Didn’t you guys do the same thing when you were little?”

No matter whether I did do that or not, my sister's room would definitely be well decorated for Christmas some days later. Mom will probably force me to help decorate again this year. By the way, my sister, who's turning eleven and going into the fifth grade this year, seems to still believe in Santa Claus somehow. She's not aware of my parents' cover-up job, which I happened to figure out long ago at the beginning of my life.

"Learn from your sister's innocent heart! One must start by believing in a dream. Otherwise, even the attainable will be out of reach. Nobody wins the lottery without buying a ticket, you know. You might wish for someone to give you a winning lottery ticket worth a million dollars, but that won't happen!"

Haruhi, howling in delight with unparalleled skill, took out a triangular party hat and put it on her head.

"When in Rome, do as the Romans do. When in a village, follow the village rules. Christmas also has its own rules to follow. That's why there are not many people who would celebrate a birthday in a bad mood. Hey, even Mister Christ would definitely rejoice seeing us having fun!"

There have been many theories related to the birth of Christ, as even the year he was born is shrouded in mystery. But again, I'm not dumb enough to recite all the theories while being oblivious to the atmosphere. Moreover, on hearing that there's multiple suggested dates for the birth of Christ, Haruhi would certainly blurt out "Well, then make each one of them Christmas!" and we would end up bringing out the tree many times each year. It would only be a fuss if we overrule the beginning of A.D; there is no help for it. Whether it is the Roman calendar or the ancient Babylonian calendar, it is just means to suit human matters. For the heavenly bodies that silently revolve in the vast universe these matters are nothing to be concerned about, and they will continue doing their thing until the end of their lives. Oh, how wonderful the universe is!

My youthful spirit was tickled instinctively by the secrets of the Great Universe, but Haruhi didn't give a damn about my dreams. Like a panda enthusiastically improving a room's decor, Haruhi rolled around putting small Christmas decorations on all corners of the room, putting a triangular hat even on the reading Nagato, and hammering the words "Merry Xmas!" on the glass windows using her snow spray.

That's fine, but from the outside the words would be backwards, you know?

While Haruhi concentrated on her activities, Asahina-san toddled towards us like a nutcracker doll, carrying a plate of teacups.

"Suzumiya-saaaan, tea is ready."

Asahina-san's appearance, with her maid-style smile, was still heavenly today, sending fresh enrichment into my heart no matter how many times I looked. Even after meeting her tragic fate nearly every time Haruhi said something, Asahina-san seemed to be comfortable with the Christmas party this time. Compared to giving out flyers in a bunny suit or appearing in movies

wearing sexually harassing costumes, it would be a much more refined fun to enjoy a party everyone in the Brigade could cuddle in.

But, will it really be just that?

“Thank you, Mikuru-chan.”

Haruhi took the cup in high spirits, and stood there gulping down the herb tea. Asahina-san watched with an innocent smile.

Haruhi drank up all the hot liquid in a few seconds, and the smile on her face grew twice as wide as before.

A bad omen. That’s the smile she has when she’s thinking of something down-and-dirty. After a long time by her side, even I could spot it.

The problem was…

“Marvelous taste, Mikuru-chan. It cannot be called a gift of gratitude, but I’d like to give you your present a little early.”

“Oh, really?”

The dainty maid fluttered her eyelids.

“It’s true. So true, that there’s no truth above it. It’s as true as the moon revolving around the earth, and the earth revolving around the sun. You might not believe Galileo, but believe me!”

“Uh, y-y-yes.”

Haruhi reached into her bag once again.

Detecting a sense and turning my head around, I met eye-to-eye with Koizumi, who gave a shrug and a faint forced smile. I’d like to snap on him for being so vague, but I somehow got it. He hadn’t joined the Haruhi bunch for over half a year for nothing, and it’d be strange if he couldn’t guess what would happen next.

Yes, I thought.

The problem was that there isn’t a person or medicine in the world that can cure Haruhi’s whims. I would grant the highest honors to whoever would invent that, personally.

“Da-daaan!”

With a childish sound effect, Haruhi took out the last Christmas item from the bottom of the bag. And that was…

“That… that is…”

Asahina-san retreated reflexively, and Haruhi proclaimed with the expression of an aged mage passing her beloved staff to her disciple.

“Santa, that’s it! Santa! Doesn’t that fit like a glove! It goes without saying; you can’t highlight this time of the year without a season-specific outfit! There you go! I’ll help you change.”

Closing gradually in on the retreating Asahina-san, Haruhi unfolded in her hands — a Santa Claus costume, no doubt.

Then, Koizumi and I were thrown out of the clubroom, and could only imagine Haruhi conducting Asahina-san’s costume-changing scene in vain.

“Eh” “Ah” “Ughh” The mournful faint cries bombarded me with unwanted images, and made me imagine that I could somehow see through the door. Okay, the time had probably come for me to really go nuts as well.

After quite a stretch of time immersing himself in the imaginary tale, Koizumi struck up a conversation, perhaps to kill time. “I feel sorry for Asahina-san.”

The guy with too much good looks and good manners leaned against the wall with his hands folded.

“It makes my heart at ease when I see Suzumiya-san enjoying herself. It pains me most when Suzumiya-san looks annoyed.”

“Because a strange space is created whenever she is irritated?”

Throwing his bangs up using one index finger, he replied,

“Yes, because of that as well. Nothing scares me and my partners more than the existence of Sealed Realities and Avatars. It might look easy to deal with, but it really is hard work. I thank my lucky stars that since this spring, the frequency of occurrences has gradually been decreasing.”

“Which means it still happens from time to time?”

“Rarely. Recently it only happens from midnight to sunrise, when Suzumiya-san is asleep. Most likely when she has bad dreams, she creates Sealed Realities subconsciously.”

“She’s a troublemaker, whether she’s asleep or awake!”

“Not at all!”

It was a sharp snap for Koizumi, and I was honestly a little shocked. Koizumi put away his smile, and gave me a long hard look.

"I guess you do not know what Suzumiya-san was like before she entered high school. From three years ago when we started our observation to the time she entered high school, it was unimaginable that she would laugh so happily every day. It all started when she met you — no, to be exact, when you two returned from the Sealed Reality. Suzumiya-san's psyche has stabilized a lot, it's incomparable to how it was in junior high."

I returned Koizumi's stare without a word, as if I'd be defeated if my eyes wandered off.

"Suzumiya-san is obviously changing. In a good direction, I might add. Our desire is to keep this situation going, and I believe the same goes for you. To her now, the SOS Brigade is an indispensable gathering. Here she can find you, she can find Asahina-san, Nagato-san is essential, and pardon my conceit, but I guess I am also. All of us nearly became one heart and one flesh."

Now that's just your logic.

"That's true. However, it doesn't sound bad, does it? Do you want to see Haruhi setting her Avatars loose hour by hour? Excuse me, but it is certainly not a good hobby."

That's not my hobby, and I won't consider turning it into one. I need to state this clearly!

Koizumi flipped his expressions, returning to his usual ambiguous smile.

"I am relieved to hear that. Speaking of changes, they are not limited to Suzumiya; we all are changing. That includes you, Asahina-san, and me. Perhaps Nagato-san as well. Besides Suzumiya, everybody will more or less change their way of thinking."

I backed away. Not because I got hit on the spot. I didn't take any of it personally, so I did not get hit figuratively. What I found surprising was that this guy had also noticed Nagato changing, bit by bit. The cheating baseball game, the Tanabata that spanned three yars, the cave cricket eradication, the murder drama on the isolated island, the looping summer break… As we were buzzing around doing this and that, Nagato's limited gestures and attitudes had tiny, but definite changes. A far cry from our first meeting at the Literature Club, which was the beginning of everything. It was no illusion. I observed with eyes like hand-made telescopes. Now that I thought about it, that girl had already seemed a little strange, even on the isolated island. Even at the public pool. Even at the Obon Festival Dance. She showed even stranger behaviors when she was forced into the role of a mage for the movie, and the computer game battle against the Computer Society…

But, isn't that good? Haruhi's changes are great, but I think Nagato's are more important!

"For the sake of world peace," Koizumi said with a smile, "organizing a Christmas party is a cheap price to pay. Furthermore, if it turns out to be fun, I find no reason to complain!"

Just as I became somehow offended that I could not find a line to retort, the door sprang open suddenly.

“There you go!”

The door opened inwards, and naturally I, putting my weight against the door, fell clumsily on my back with a loud thud.

“Hiehh!?”

The voice was neither mine nor Haruhi’s, but Asahina-san’s, and the voice came from above. In other words, lying on my back looking towards the ceiling, I saw not the ceiling but something else.

“Hey, Kyon! Don’t peep!” That’d be Haruhi.

“Hwa, ahh…” And that’d be Asahina-san, who was completely off guard as she cried and jumped backwards. I swear to the myriad of deities, I only saw her legs!

“What are you lying there waiting for? Get the hell up!”

Grabbed by the collar by Haruhi, I eventually managed to stand up.

“You peeping Kyon! Trying to peep on Mikuru-chan’s underwear? You are two-million-five-thousand-six-hundred years behind! That was deliberate, right? RIGHT!?”

It was your fault, opening the door without giving a signal. It was an accident. An accident, Asahina-san! — The words were on my lips, but then my eyes were drawn elsewhere. Who is asking what again?

“Wawa…”

There was nothing in my eyes but Asahina-san, standing with a brush of pink on her cheeks.

Red clothing with white lining. A red hat with a fluffy ball at the end… wearing only those, Asahina-san grabbed her short skirt with both hands, and looked intently at me with curiously teary eyes filled with embarrassment.

That had to be Santa, perfect from all angles, impeccable and without fault. That had to be Asahina-san’s true identity at that moment — the granddaughter of a senile Santa who had secretly transferred the family estate to her.

Upon being told this, 80% of people would fall for it. My sister would definitely be one of the 80%. No doubt.

“Just fantastic.” It was Koizumi expressing his opinions. “My apologies, but I could only come up with hackneyed expressions. Yes, it suits you very well. Definitely.”

“I knew it!”

Haruhi cuddled on Asahina-san’s shoulders, and rubbed her cheeks against the eye-rolling Asahina-san’s face.

“Isn’t she super adorably cute? Mikuru-chan, be more confident in yourself! From now until the Christmas Party, you will be the SOS Brigade’s Santa Claus! You have all the qualifications for this!”

Asahina-san panted pitifully. However, this time Haruhi was correct. Nobody would refute that, I thought to myself. As I turned to Nagato, unsurprisingly, the petite, short-haired, silent girl just continued her reading.

She was still wearing her triangular hat.

After that, Haruhi lined us up in a row, and stood in front.

“Understood? In these times, it’s not okay to absent-mindedly follow any Santa you see on the street. They’re fakes. The real one only exists in special places on the earth. Mikuru-chan, you need to be extra careful! Don’t get stuff easily from a Santa you don’t know. Don’t nod to whatever they say.”

Not good advice, after you coerced Asahina-san into being a fake Santa.

Don’t tell me that this girl, despite her age, and like my sister, still believes in that elderly fellow who’s in the business of international volunteering. Well, it is the same girl who hung wish messages to Orihime and Hikoboshi, so it’s not impossible. However, I just kept my doubts to myself. I mean, hey, Saint Asahina had revealed herself in this room! There it was, a fake that surpassed the real thing. What more could you wish for? If one wished for anything more, complaints would come from any of the three Scandinavian countries.

I was pondering on the source of capital within the shadow of this sluggish old man working only once a year.

“Hey, Kyon. The idea of having a grand Christmas party is good in itself. This year the idea came too late, so it can only be for Christ’s birthday. But next year we have to include birthday parties for the Buddha and Mohammad. It wouldn’t be fair otherwise!”

Why not throw in the birthdays for founders of Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism? Watching this bunch of unbelieving lads celebrating, these figures, who should be above the clouds by now, can do nothing but force a laugh. Well, Haruhi wasn’t doing all this to celebrate anyway; she just

wanted an excuse to make a fuss, so I guess it evens out. However, if someone is going to receive divine punishment, please place the blame solely upon Haruhi. My role as her accomplice was really small, you know.

In that situation, to which deity should I make my excuse? I was pondering this as Haruhi settled in the Brigade leader's seat and gave me a scornful glance.

"What would be nice? Hotpot? Sukiyaki? Crab is a no-no. I can't take it. Picking the flesh out of the shell drives me nuts. Why can't crabs make their shells edible? How come they didn't do anything about that during the course of evolution, might I ask?"

That's exactly why they evolved shells! They don't undergo natural selection in the depths of the sea just for the sake of your stomach!

Koizumi raised his hand and spoke up.

"Then we must book a place in advance. The holiday is approaching, and everywhere will be fully booked if we don't hurry."

Well, I just don't think I'm inclined to go to places he recommends. Maybe the nuthead shop owner will pop up in the middle of dinner and stage another murder comedy beyond everyone's wildest expectations.

"Oh, no need to worry about that."

As if she had the same impression that I did, Haruhi shook her head with a smiling face. But this was what she said next:

"I'm having it here. The necessary hardware is already here. The only thing left is the food. Let's see… Better bring a rice cooker. By the way, alcohol is strictly prohibited, since I have vowed in my heart that, for my whole life, I will not drink."

I'd rather have you vow something else… But another point came first that could not be dismissed without consideration. "Having it here?" I looked around the room.

The room already had a pot and a portable stove ready, and there was even a fridge here. Haruhi brought everything in during the dawn of the SOS Brigade, but don't tell me that they were all for the sake of this day! Till now, the portable stove had been useful in helping Asahina-san serve real tea. But at school, and in such an old and shabby clubroom block, was it really a good idea to cook in the first place? It isn't wise to ignore this. An open flame is prohibited in this building!

"It'll be fine."

Undeterred, Haruhi beamed like a culinary prodigy who somehow had solid skills without even a cooking license.

“In this case, it’s more fun to hide. If the student council or one the teachers bust in, I’ll show them my spectacular hotpot preparation. This is the plan: wait till then, and they will be so overwhelmed by the delicacy that they will tearfully grant special approval for our party! Flawless! Perfect!”

Though being scornful to anything bothersome, Haruhi could do anything well if she had to do it. So I guessed her cooking expertise definitely lived up to her words. But a hotpot? When had it been decided? The conversation had went up to the point when crab was decided to be no good, but she pretended to collect opinions and then suddenly reached the conclusion herself — well it’s not as if this was the first time. Forgive, and forget…

And so, that’s what happened yesterday. As I told Taniguchi a short version of this, we arrived at our school.

“Christmas Party…”

When we passed through the school gate, Taniguchi was still having trouble hiding his laughter.

“Those are definitely Suzumiya’s trademark actions. A hotpot party in the clubroom. Well, make sure that the teachers don’t find out! It’d turn into trouble again if they did.”

“Are you coming, then?”

Due to what we had discussed earlier, I tried to invite him. If it were Taniguchi, even Haruhi probably wouldn’t mind. He, Kunikida and Tsuruya-san had become the Filler Trio whenever we had a problem finding people.

However, Taniguchi shook his head.

“I am so sorry, Kyon. That day, I have no spare time for messing around eating some dumb hotpot! Wuahaha”

What on earth is that disgusting laugh about?

“Listen: gathering a group of strange pals and poking into a hotpot in a Christmas Party is only for unpopular geeks. I am very sorry, but I have bid my farewell to the group.”

Are you for real?

“Well, think of me as exactly the one beyond your imagination. I have already crafted a red heart mark on the 24th of my schedule! My apologies. My HEARTFELT apologies. I am SO, SOO SOOOORRY!”

What the hell is going on? How come that dumbass Taniguchi can land himself a girlfriend, while I'm playing mysterious games with Haruhi and the others in the SOS Brigade?

"Who is she?"

I asked, trying as hard as I could to not sound cynical.

"A tenth grader from Kouyouen. A safe bet isn't it?"

Kouyouen Academy. The all-girls high school next to the station down the hill. It is located exactly at the starting point of our excruciating hike, so it is a common morning scene to see the Daimyo's Parade of girls wearing black blazers as their uniform. The school is famous for its classy ladies, but even more enviable is that they do not need to walk the murderous slope. No, I wasn't jealous of Taniguchi at all.

"What's the problem? You have Haruhi already! Hotpot… And she's making it, right? Hotpot as a self-made cuisine does sound a little dumb and cheap to me, but I'm sure it'll fill you up. I'm jealous, Kyon!"

That bastard. He brought up Christmas Eve just to satisfy his desire to show off?

"Hmm, I guess it is about time to decide on some initial plans for where and how to spend the time. I am so troubled!"

I was losing my spirit, and my words.

After school, nothing special happened. Koizumi and I were chased around the clubroom putting up the new decorations Haruhi had brought. Haruhi gave commands and pointed around with her finger. Asahina-san, clad in a Santa outfit, was mascot-cum-tea-server. And today, Nagato was reading a hardcover book… while, once again, wearing the triangular hat on her head.

Then came the end of the day. The hotpot's contents were still undecided. The only decision in the meantime was that I would be assigned as the carrier and sent outside for shopping. What on earth would that hotpot be? I'd rather not have a potluck, with its smell of sinister schemes.

This is too long for a prologue. However, the above really is just a prologue, nothing else. The real action comes from this point onwards, starting the next day. It might have started tonight, but it doesn't really matter.

The next day was December 18, when even the mountain breezes were frozen. That day, I was thrown into the abyss of fear.

Let me say this in advance: it was no laughing matter.

Chapter 1

In the morning, I woke up under my sister's usual killer blanket-strip-away move, together with the tri-colored cat that wrapped itself in the blanket beside me. This is my sister, the early-morning assassin who carried out Mom's orders dutifully.

"Mom said you should eat some breakfast properly."

Smiling, my sister held up the grudging cat from the bed with both arms, and brushed her nose against the back of its ears.

"Shami too! Time to eat!"

Shamisen, who had become our house pet after the Cultural Festival, yawned with a blank face and licked its front paw. The originally-talkative tri-colored male cat had completely lost its voice, and established its status in our home as merely a pet. It had become a nondescript cat found everywhere – as if I had hallucinated that this cat had ever spoken in human language, now that I thought about it. The cat is great and not fastidious: its purrs are seldom, close to absent, as if it has forgotten cat language along with human language. Somehow it made my room its bed, and thus grew silent to the frequent dropping by of my sister, who is avid in taking care of Shamisen.

"Shamiiii, Shamiiii. It is time to eat!"

Singing with lyrics that didn't match the rhythm, my sister exited the room while hugging the cat with apparent effort. Getting goose bumps from the cold morning air, I glared down at the clock face for a short time. Finally I struggled up, abandoning the lingering affection for my warm bed.

Afterwards, I changed, washed, went down to the dining room, gulped down breakfast in five minutes, and exited the doorway much earlier than my sister. Today the weather was cold again, in good progress.

Until now, everything had proceeded normally.

I was climbing the usual slope when the familiar back-of-the-head was within sight. The figure ten meters or so in front of me was Taniguchi, no doubt. Usually, this guy gleefully bounces and jumps up the hiking path, but today he was definitely walking slowly. After a moment, I caught up with him.

"Hey, Taniguchi!"

It would be nice to take the initiative to pat him on the shoulder from time to time, I thought to myself, and did exactly that.

"…Hmm, Kyon?"

The voice was surely muffled. Of course; Taniguchi was wearing a white mask.

"What's up? Got a cold?"

"Eh…?" Taniguchi looked worn out. "A cold, as you can see. To be honest, I would rather take absence, but my old man was noisy about it."

He was so full of energy yesterday, but then suddenly caught a cold, I saw.

"What the hell? I was also feeling unwell yesterday! *Cough cough*"

Okay, don't mess up my pace, just because I was not accustomed to seeing Taniguchi coughing and looking weak. But was he already close to being sick yesterday? I could only see the scatterbrain as usual.

"Hmm… Really? I did not intend to look well."

Taniguchi tilted his head, and I gave a spiteful smile.

"You had been piping merrily about your Christmas Eve date, hadn't you? Well, get well quickly, before the date! Such a chance rarely visits your door, you know!"

However, Taniguchi tilted his head even more.

"Date? What the hell? Idiot. I have no plans for Christmas Eve!"

The "What?" question should have come from me. What happened to his girlfriend at Kouyouen Girls High? Did he get dumped just last night?

"Hey, Kyon, what the hell are you talking about? I know nothing of this!"

Taniguchi grumpily shut his mouth, and turned to walk forward again. Every cold symptom seemed to be in effect, and his frailty did not look pretended. Moreover, judging from his condition, his date plans were surely toast, and he would just as surely be exhausted. With his pompous claims beforehand, it was definitely tearing his heart apart just to meet me face to face. I see, I see.

"Don't look so grim!"

I pushed Taniguchi's back.

"Why not join the Hotpot Party? We can still count you in now!"

"What hotpot? What party are you talking about? I don't remember hearing such a thing…"

Oh, really? The shock was so great that whatever I said would fall on deaf ears for quite some time, I guessed. Let me be the one holding his hand then. Everything would be solved by the vast never-ending flow of time. I would not mention the matter anymore, I promise.

Taniguchi continued to drag himself up, and I also continued my climb slowly besides him.

It was still impossible for me to notice at that moment.

I was caught off guard: the cold had turned into an epidemic within Class 1-5 without me noticing. I got into the classroom just before the bell rang, but there were still a couple of empty seats, and one fifth of the whole class had caught the white mask fad. The only explanation was that all of them had double booked their cold's incubation period and onset period.

I was even more surprised to find that the seat right behind me had been unoccupied since the first lesson.

"This is unbelievable…"

Was Haruhi taking sick leave? Was the cold that nasty and rampant this year? It is unbelievable that there are pathogens that exist which are courageous enough to invade her body, not to mention how unbelievable it is that Haruhi can be struck down by germs or viruses. The more convincing explanation was that Haruhi was preparing for some new scheme she had just thought of. Maybe there would be something else besides a hotpot?

The classroom ambiance was bleak, and it was not because there were no air-conditioners. A sudden increase in absentees. It even looked like the total population in Class 1-5 had somehow dropped.

It was true that I could not feel the overwhelming presence of Haruhi from behind. But at the same time, I also felt that the atmosphere had changed inexplicably.

Then came the lessons I took idly, after which, the lunch break smoothly followed.

As I was taking the stone cold lunchbox out of my bag, Kunikida approached with his lunch in one hand, and sat behind me.

"Seems like you are taking a break. Mind if I sit here?"

Kunikida said as he was unwrapping his Tupperware from its napkin. After becoming classmates in high school, it turned into half a habit to have lunch with this guy. I searched for my other lunch mate Taniguchi, but he was not in the classroom; perhaps he went to the school cafeteria.

I turned my chair sideways.

“Somehow the cold has suddenly turned so popular. Thank God I’m not infected, though.”

“Hmm?”

Kunikida was putting his Tupperware carefully on the spread out napkin and examining the contents, and he returned a dumbfounded look at me. Moving his chopsticks like a crab with its claws, Kunikida spoke.

“Symptoms of the cold spreading were already noticeable a week ago! It doesn’t look like the flu, but it might be better if it were the flu. Since there are specific remedies nowadays.”

“A week ago?”

I stopped cutting up my spinach-laced omelet, and asked again.

I could not think of anyone spreading the cold germs the same time last week. Nobody had been absent, and nobody was coughing in lessons as far as I could remember. Everyone in Class 1-5 looked healthy, but could it be that the Devil of Ailment had been operating secretly outside my sight?

“What? There were quite a few people absent. Didn’t you notice?”

I didn’t at all. Was that for real?

“Sure it is. It turned increasingly worse from the start of this week. Please don’t isolate the whole tenth grade though. Winter break would be chipped off otherwise, I bet.”

Kunikida stuffed some more furikake rice into his mouth.

“Taniguchi had also been green to the gills these days. His father’s principle was to cure ailment by vigor, and he could not take leave unless his temperature was over 40 degrees (Celsius). I hope that he will be doing something before the cold gets worse.”

I stopped my chopsticks.

“Kunikida. Sorry, but I thought Taniguchi started being almost dead today.”

“Oh no, no way. He has been like that since the beginning of this week, hasn’t he? He took a break from yesterday’s physical education time.”

I was becoming increasingly confused.

Wait, Kunikida. What on earth are you talking about? As far as I can remember, in yesterday’s physical education lesson, Taniguchi took on a football rival match with vigor, as if he was on steroids. I could not be mistaken, as I was in the opposing team, and repeatedly slide-tackled him.

I was not being resentful to Taniguchi's getting a girlfriend, but if I had known what would happen today I would probably have thought twice before tackling him.

"Are you sure? Really? That's strange!"

Kunikida tilted his head as he was picking out the carrots from the Kinpiragobou dish.

"Did I see it wrong?"

He said in an easy-going tone.

"Hmm, well we'll see when Taniguchi comes back."

What on earth has happened today? Taniguchi and Kunikida are talking as if they were behind thick fog, and even Haruhi is absent! Don't tell me that this is an omen for happenings that trouble the whole human race except Haruhi. My usually nonexistent sixth sense began to sound sirens, and strange creeps suddenly ran up the back of my neck.

I was correct.

My gut feeling was not to be belittled. There was no doubt that it was an omen. What my gut feeling did not tell me was whom this would trouble. The whole human race except Haruhi… well, not exactly. Surprisingly as it seems, only one person noticed and was troubled by this turn of events. Except for this poor person, the entire human race was not at all troubled. It's because there was no way they could perceive the beginning of this incident itself. There's no way one could perceive something outside of one's perception. From their shoes, the world had not changed at all.

So who was the troubled one?

The answer was apparent.

Me!

I stood dumbstruck within the confusion, and ended up being left behind by the world.

Yes, I finally realized.

The lunch break of Dec 18.

The omen came in a physical form, and it opened the classroom door.

Wow! A couple of girls seating at the classroom front near the door burst into shouts of joy. The shouts were apparently from recognizing the classmate who just entered. From the gaps within the loose group of sailor clothes, I caught a glimpse of *that person* at the center of attention.

With a bag dangling in one hand, *that person* gave a smile to the approaching friends.

“Yes, I’m all right now. I felt much better right after I took the injection at the hospital in the morning. Having nothing to do at home, I figured I would come back to school, even just for the afternoon lessons.”

A gentle smile answered the question if the cold had been cured. Ending the short lively conversation, with semi-long hair swaying, *that person* gradually… walked — towards — us.

“Oops, gotta go!”

Kunikida bit on his chopsticks and got up. For me, it was as if my vocal cords’ voicing abilities had all been confiscated, or even as if I had forgotten to suck in oxygen through respiration. I merely stared at *that person*. The flow of time seemed infinite, but in fact, she had only walked a few steps. When the footsteps finally stopped, *that person* was standing right next to me.

“What’s wrong?”

While looking at me, she said hackneyed expressions in a mystified tone.

“You look as if you’ve seen a ghost! Or is there something on my face?”

Then she turned to Kunikida, who was trying to tidy up his Tupperware.

“Oh, just let me hang my bag. Please continue with your lunch. I already ate before I came. During lunchtime, I will lend my seat to you.”

Just as we were told, she hung her bag on the hook at the desk’s side, and turned her body gracefully towards the ring of waiting friends.

“Wait.”

I guess my voice must have turned shrill.

“Why are you here?”

that person turned around, and stabbed me with a cool glance.

“What do you mean? Is it strange that I am here? Or do you mean that it would be better if I were out with a cold for longer? What exactly do you mean by that?”

“Not that. I don’t care if you have a cold or not. Not that…”

“Kyon.”

Kunikida poked my shoulders worriedly.

“You are so strange today! Kyon has been saying strange things all day.”

“Kunikida, don’t you think of anything when you see this person?”

Unable to withstand it anymore, I stood up and pointed with my finger to *that person*, who was looking at me as if she witnessed an enigma.

“You also know who this is, don’t you? This person shouldn’t even be here!”

“…Kyon, how rude it is to forget your classmate’s face just because she took a brief leave! What do you mean by that I should not be here? We have always been in the same class, haven’t we?”

No way could I forget! This attempted murderer! Even if I were to forget the face of a person who would like to kill me, half a year was a little too short.

“I see.”

that person spread a smile across her face, as if she had just thought of a super prank.

“You took a nap after lunch didn’t you? Are you sure you are not having a bad dream? That should be it. Come on! Wake up!”

“You think so?” With a broad smile on her lovable face, *that person* turned to Kunikida for agreement. She took the appearance of the girl whose image had been etched into my brain and could not be shrugged off.

Flashbacks of various images. A classroom basked in sunset — shadows extending on the floor — walls without windows — distorted space — the wielding of a knife — a wisp of a smile — sand-like crystals that crumbled down…

Annihilated after defeat in her battle with Nagato, she was the original class representative, who on the surface, had transferred to a school in Canada.

Standing here was Asakura Ryouko.

“You’ll be refreshed if you wash your face. Do you have a handkerchief with you? I can lend you mine.”

Asakura put her hand into her skirt pocket, and I stopped her with my hand. Who would know if she took out more than her handkerchief?

“No thanks. Rather, tell me what is happening. Everything. In particular, tell me why you are leaving your bag at Haruhi’s seat? This isn’t your seat, it’s Haruhi’s.”

“Haruhi?”

Asakura knitted her eyebrows, and asked Kunikida.

“Who is Haruhi? Is there someone with such a nickname?”

Kunikida returned an answer that ended all hope.

“Doesn’t ring a bell. Haruhi-san… How do you write it?”

“Haruhi is Haruhi!”

I mumbled with a dazzling sensation.

“Have you all forgotten about Suzumiya Haruhi? How can you guys ever forget such a person?”

“Suzumiya Haruhi… Well, Kyon.”

With a comforting voice, Kunikida slowly divulged.

“Such a person is not in our class! By the way, since the seating rearrangement earlier, this seat has already been Asakura-san’s. Are you confused with another class? Hmm, I have never heard of a Suzumiya before. Shouldn’t be in the tenth grade…”

“I don’t have any idea either.”

With the voice of a gentle cat, Asakura spoke as if urging me to receive treatment.

“Kunikida-kun, can you take a look inside my desk? At the corner there should be a class name book.”

I snatched away the notebook that Kunikida took out. I first opened the page of Class 1-5 of the First year, and ran my finger against the list of girl names.

Saeki, Sakanaka, Suzuki, Seno…

Not a single name was between Suzuki and Seno. The name of Suzumiya Haruhi had disappeared from the class name book. Who are you searching for? Such a girl does not even exist in the first place! The page screamed out loud, and I closed the name book and my eyes.

“…Kunikida, I have a request.”

“Yes?”

“Pinch me on the cheek. I want to wake up.”

“Are you sure?”

He put his whole force in it. It was painful. But I did not wake up. Opening my eyes, I could still see Asakura standing there, curving her lips into an arc.

What on earth had happened?

I suddenly realized that we had become the center of attention in the class. The eyes were all focused on me, as if they saw an aging stray dog that suffered from canine distemper. Dammit! Why? I did not say anything wrong!

“Dammit!”

I asked two questions repeatedly to the people around me.

Where is Suzumiya Haruhi?

Didn't Asakura Ryouko transfer?

“Don’t know.”

“Nope, she didn’t.”

The answers I got did not smell good at all. As if on cue, they affected me to the point of dizziness and nausea. I could only support my body by putting my hand on a nearby table. Some part of my sanity seemed to be shattered.

Asakura put her hand on my wrist, and peered into me worriedly. The sweet aroma from her hair was like narcotics to me.

“Seems like you should go to the nurse’s office. These kinds of things can happen when you are not feeling well. It must be so! Are you starting to develop a cold?”

No way!

I would like to scream out loud. I was not the strange one! This situation was strange itself!

“Get your hands off me!”

I pushed away Asakura’s hand, and ran for the classroom exit. The slight unpleasant feeling on my skin was seeping into my brain. The cold that broke out all of a sudden, the gap in conversation with Taniguchi, the disappearance of Haruhi’s name on the name book, the appearance of Asakura… What? Haruhi was gone? Nobody remembered her? That couldn’t be! Wasn’t this world revolving around that girl? Wasn’t that girl THE Blacklisted Character on the Universal Scale?

On the verge of stumbling over, I pumped my legs hard, and stepped forth onto the hallway almost on all fours.

The first thing that came to mind was Nagato's face. She would definitely explain the situation to me. After all, it was Nagato Yuki, the silent but omnipotent alien android. Every single time she would sort things out. It is no exaggeration that I could survive thanks to Nagato.

I have Nagato!

And she would rescue a person like me from this stranded situation!

Nagato's class was in sight. Without needing to run, I arrived a few seconds later. Unable to think of anything, I opened the door and searched for the petite short-haired figure.

Not there.

But it was too soon to give up. In lunchtime she most probably was in the clubroom reading books. Even though she wasn't in the classroom, it would be unwise to conclude that even Nagato had disappeared.

The next guy in mind was Koizumi. The literature clubroom, located in the old wing, was far from here. The building was even beyond Asahina-san's eleventh grade classroom. It would be faster to go to Class 1-9 one story below. Koizumi Itsuki, just be there! In no other situation would I want to see his all-smiley face even more.

I ran at a dogtrot along the hallway, jumped down the stairs skipping three stair steps, and head towards Class 1-9 at the corner of the school building, while I was praying for that supernaturally powered dude to be there.

Passed Class 1-7, passed Class 1-8, and there Class 1-9 would…

"What? How come?"

I stopped, finally starting to realize, and checked once again the plates that hung out from the wall. On the left of Class 1-8 was Class 1-7. On the right of Class 1-8 was…

Only the staircase landing leading to the emergency stairs.

Nothing else. No trace of anything.

"Of all things who could imagine that…?"

Not to mention no Koizumi.

The entire class of 1-9 was gone.

I really had my hands tied now.

Who could have even imagined that the classroom that had existed yesterday would be gone today? It wasn't as if just a single person had disappeared, the whole class had been erased, and the building itself shrunk. No matter how rushed the work was, it would be impossible to finish it all in just one night. Where had all the Class 1-9 people gone?

The great shock had knocked loose my perception of time. God knew how long I had frozen on the spot there, before I regained consciousness by a slight jab in my back. In the cloud I heard the voice of a biology teacher, who looked like a marshmallow hugging some textbooks.

"What are you doing here? Lessons have started! Return to your classroom!"

I must have missed the chime signaling the end of the break. The hallway was already cleared of people, and echoed only the raised voice of a teacher from the Class 1-7 classroom.

I staggeringly started to move. The time for ascertaining the signs was up. Things had already been set in motion. Those who should not have existed appeared, and those who should exist were gone. Exchanging Haruhi, Koizumi and all students in Class 1-9 for just Asakura was not up to scale!

"What the hell?"

If I wasn't going nuts, the world had gone nuts.

Who did that?

Was it you, Haruhi?

Thanks to all that, I heard absolutely nothing from the afternoon lessons. All voices and sounds slipped straight out of my mind, and all information failed to be implanted in my brain cells. Before I noticed, even homeroom had finished, and time had become after school.

I was frightened, not so much by Asakura who was scribbling with her mechanical pencil behind me, but rather that both Haruhi and Koizumi were not at school. Even seeking reconfirmation from other people made me irritated beyond endurable limits. "Doesn't ring a bell." Every time I heard the line, I sank deeper into a bottomless swamp. I was not even recharged with enough energy to get my butt out of my seat.

Taniguchi walked straight home with Kunikida, who felt a little anxious about me. Asakura left the classroom in merry laughter with a couple of girls. She took a look at me before she headed out, a look showing sincere concern for a depressed classmate, and my head felt dizzy from it. Fishy. All of them.

Nearly dragged behind by some guys for cleanup duty, I finally managed to step out onto the hallway, with my bag in one hand.

After all, this wasn't where I belonged after class.

With a heavy heart I walked down the stairs and reached the first floor. Over there, a slit of light appeared in front of my eyes, and I dashed off towards it.

"Asahina-san!"

Could there be any merrier sight than that? Walking towards me from the other side was my goddess, my eye-stress relief medicine. What added joy to joy was the figure of Tsuruya-san beside the glamorous baby-faced beauty. The overwhelming joy busted my sensibility afar.

— I probably should have been a little more prudent.

I rushed towards the two seniors with amazing speed, and gripped hard the shoulder of Asahina-san, who widened her eyes at me.

"He-eh!"

The shock was apparent on her face, but my mouth just kept on speaking.

"Haruhi is gone! Koizumi's class has turned into the Drifting Classroom! I haven't found Nagato yet, but Asakura is here, and the school's become a strange place itself! You're still my Asahina-san, right!?"

Bang! It was the sound of Asahina-san's bag and calligraphy set dropping onto the floor.

"Eh? Ah, he… Eh. Well…But…"

"So are you Asahina-san from the future?"

"…The future? What do you mean? And, please… let go of me."

The pit of my stomach cringed. Asahina-san looked at me just like a domesticated impala that had seen a wild jaguar. Her eyes were clearly filled with fright, and that was what I feared most.

Just as I was shocked stiff, I felt my arm twist upwards. Upsetting cracks sounded from my joints. Ouch!

"Wait a sec, young lad!"

Tsuruya-san grappled my arm using techniques from ancient martial arts.

"Stop jumping on people! Look, my Mikuru is shaking from head to toe!"

The voice was laughing, but the glance from her eyes was sharp as a sword. I looked at Asahina-san. She was definitely retreating with teary eyes.

"Are you a first-year from the Mikuru Fan Club? There are procedures to everything, young lad. Rushing things doesn't impress me."

The psychological chill I experienced so many times today ran down my spine.

"Tsuruya-san…" Still locked in a udegarami position, I wriggled out a sound.

Tsuruya-san looked me squarely in the face, as if I were a complete stranger to her.

"Hey, how come you know me? By the way, who are you? Mikuru's acquaintance?"

I saw something I least wanted to see. Cringing behind Tsuruya-san, Asahina-san gave me a closer look, and shook her head furiously.

"D…D…Don't know him at all. E..Eh. He must have confused me with somebody else…"

Feeling as if I received the scorecard of complete failure for this year, just when my tenth year was drawing to a close, my eyes grew faint. I would be silent to anyone attacking me with any words, but Asahina-san's words were the biggest shock to me, ever since my cousin, who I had a crush on when I was young, eloped with another boy.

Surely I did not confuse her with anybody else by calling Asahina-san Asahina-san, unless this Asahina-san was an Asahina-san from some other time. … Oh, I got it! There was one way to find out whether this Asahina-san is actually the Asahina-san I knew, right?

"Asahina-san."

I pointed my free hand to my own chest. I can only say I lost my mind. My mouth moved itself with the following line,

"There should be a star-like birthmark somewhere around here on your chest. Do you have one? If you are okay with it, let me check—"

I was hit with a full-force punch.

By Asahina-san's fist.

Asahina-san, dumbfounded by the line I spurt out, turned redder by the second. Tears welled in her eyes, and in a slow, novice-like motion she blasted a right straight punch to my face. "…Urgh" a sobbing sound escaped from her throat as she ran off.

“Hey, Mikuru! Ah, whatever. And you, young lad, keep your otaku stench in check! Mikuru-chan is pretty timid, you know! If you dare to do anything to her again, you’ll feel my hair-standing fury!”

Giving me an unwelcomingly tight final grip on my wrist, Tsuruya-san picked up the bag and calligraphy set on the floor, held them to her chest, and ran off chasing Asahina-san.

“Hey, wait a bit— Mikuru—”

“…”

Watching them, stupefied, a cold wintery wind blew inside my head.

That’s the end to it all, no doubt.

Could I survive tomorrow? If news that I made Asahina-san cry spread around the school, there would be more than a few guys who would come attack me. If the situation were reversed, I would do the same as well. Maybe I should prepare my will.

I was gradually pushed to my wit’s end. I called Haruhi’s cell phone, only to hear the operator’s “the phone number you have dialed is no longer available.” I had no record of her home phone number, and her name was erased completely from the namebook. I considered going off to her house, but on second thought I hadn’t even been there before. It was unfair considering that Haruhi had been to my house, but it was too late to think of that now.

Disregarding the disappearance of Class 1-9, I went to the staff office to ask whether Koizumi or Haruhi was taking sick leave somewhere. The result was flat negative. There was no student in any class with the name Suzumiya Haruhi. There was no transfer student in this school or coming to this school with the name Koizumi Itsuki. Or so I heard.

I had come to a dead end.

Where could the leads be? Was this a Where’s Haruhi game organized by Haruhi? Was it a game with the goal of reaching where the disappeared Haruhi had gone? But what was this game for?

I thought as I walked. Thanks to Asahina-san’s single punch, my head cooled off a little. There was no use burning my ass off. In such a moment, I needed to be calm. Calm.

“Please, I beg you.” I murmured.

There was only one destination now. It was the final foundation, the final absolute defense line. If this were to fall, then all would end. Game over.

The literature clubroom, located at the clubroom block normally referred to as the Old Block.

If Nagato wasn't there, what could I possibly do?

I slowed my pace deliberately, and inched towards the clubroom taking all the time I needed. After a few minutes, standing in front of the old and worn wooden door, I put my hand on my chest, confirming my heart rate. It was far from normal operation, but it was a lot better than at lunch break. Probably my senses had gradually gone numb after too many hits from the string of anomalies. I was driven to the corner. There was no path ahead of me except to barge into the cloud of darkness, with the worst-case scenario in my mind.

I skipped knocking on the door, and threw the door wide open.

"…!"

And then I saw.

A petite figure sitting on a makeshift chair, with a book spread at a corner of the long table in front of her.

It was Nagato Yuki, staring straight at me through her glasses, with her face written all over with surprise, her mouth popping open.

"You're here…"

I muttered a sigh of half resignation, half relief, and closed the door behind me. Nagato did not say anything as usual, but I couldn't loosen myself and rejoice. The Nagato I knew did not wear glasses, ever since the incident with Asakura. However, the Nagato here had the exact same glasses she had worn some time ago. I thought about it the second time, but Nagato just looked cooler without her glasses. That was my preference.

Moreover, that expression just didn't match. What was with her face, like a female Literature Club member caught off guard by a male student dashing in, someone she didn't recognize at all? What was with the surprise? Isn't it characteristic of Nagato to be furthest away from such emotions?

"Nagato…"

With the lesson from Asahina-san fresh in my mind, I managed to suppress my about-to-pounce upper body, and walked to the table.

"What?"

Nagato replied without moving an inch.

"Tell me. Do you know me?"

She tightened her lips, and pushed the bridge of her glasses. Then came a long period of silence.

I was thinking of giving up, and find myself a monastery to retreat from this world, when a reply came.

“I know you.”

Nagato put her gaze somewhere around my chest. My hope welled. This Nagato might be the Nagato I knew.

“In fact, I also know a little bit about you. Would you listen to me for a second?”

“…”

“You are not human, but an organic android created by aliens. You had wielded impressive powers like magic several times, like the homerun-mode bat, and invasion to Cave Cricket Space…”

As soon as I started talking, a sense of regret gradually crept into me. Nagato was apparently making a strange face. Her eyes and mouth were open, and her gaze was wandering around my shoulders. The ambience around her read like she felt frightened to look straight at me.

“…That was you whom I knew all along. Was it correct?”

“I am sorry.”

Nagato’s reply made me doubt whether my ears were working properly. Why apologize? Why is Nagato saying this?

“I do not know. I know you are a student in Class 1-5. I see you from time to time. However, I know nothing except that. To me, this is the first time I’ve talked to you.”

The final foundation turned into a house built on loose, weathered sand, collapsed and crumbled.

“…So you’re not an alien? The name Suzumiya Haruhi does not ring a bell to you at all?”

Nagato tilted her head in confusion, savoring the word “alien” on her lips.

“Nope,” she replied.

“Wait a sec!”

Except for Nagato, who else could I rely on? I was like an infant swallow being abandoned by its parents. My only chance of keeping sane was through her doing something. If this went on, I would go crazy.

“No way!”

Oh no, I was losing my composure once again. My mind was in confusion, with meteor showers of the three primary colors flying around like crazy, I circled around the table, and approached Nagato's side.

The pale fingers closed the book. It was a thick hard-cover. I could not catch the title in time. Nagato stood up from her chair, and shifted one step behind as if to retreat from me. Her two eyes, like polished black Go stones, were rolling in hesitation.

I put my hands on Nagato's shoulders. I lost my self-composure to look back to my recent failure with Asahina-san. I was totally focused on not letting Nagato go. If I hadn't grabbed her like that, all my friends would have slipped through the cracks of my fingers, I feared. I didn't want to lose anyone anymore.

With my hand feeling her body heat through the school uniform, I talked to her profile framed in short hair, as she was turning her face away from me.

"Please remember! The world changed when yesterday turned to today. Haruhi's been replaced by Asakura! Who is behind this player substitution? Information Synthesis Thought Entities? Asakura was resurrected, so you must know something! You and Asakura are from the same mold, right? What is this scheme, huh? Even if you use big words, you should still be able to explain—"

Just like what you have done all along, I was about to continue, but I sensed the feeling of liquid lead spreading inside my stomach.

What was this reaction… similar to a normal person's?

Nagato's eyes were tightly shut, and a blush of red began spreading on her ceramic-like pale cheek. Moans, like faint sighs, escaped from her slightly parted lips, and I finally noticed the quivering of her delicate shoulders under my hands, like a puppy under chilling air. A shivering voice reached my ears.

"Stop it…"

I recollected. For some time now, Nagato's back was stuck against the wall. In other words, I had forced Nagato against the wall without noticing. What had I done? I was behaving like a thug, wasn't I? If anyone had witnessed this, I would immediately have my hands handcuffed behind my back, and receive judgement from the public. When viewed objectively, I was nothing but a bastard who attacked a meek female member when there were just the two of us in the literature club room.

"I'm sorry."

Holding my hands up, I felt strength draining out of me.

“I didn’t mean to attack you. I just wanted to confirm something…”

My knees felt weak. I pulled a nearby folding chair to my side, and collapsed in it like some mollusk straight after landing. Nagato did not move at all, with her back to the wall. It could only be considered lucky that she hadn’t dashed out of the room.

I swept my eyes across the room one more time, and realized in one glance that this was not the secret base for the SOS Brigade. In this room were lines of bookshelves and folding chairs, and a desktop computer on top of a long makeshift table. The desktop was not the latest model Haruhi had snatched from the Computer Society using blackmail, but a model at least three generations older. Comparatively speaking, the processing power difference was like that between a two-horse phaeton and a maglev.

The Captain’s desk, on which a prism with the word “Captain” was written on it, was nowhere to be found, as expected. The refrigerator and the rack of various costumes were absent as well. No board games brought by Koizumi. No maid. No Santa’s granddaughter. Nothing at all.

“Damn it!”

I held my head with my hands. Game over! If this is someone’s psychological attack, congratulations on her resounding success! I would give her first honor. So who was behind this experiment? Haruhi? Information Synthesis Thought Entities? Some undetected new enemy of this world? …

It lasted for around five minutes. Struggling to lighten up my mood, I sheepishly lifted up my head.

Nagato, still plastered to the wall, fixed her ebony-like eyes on me. Her glasses were slightly tilted. My only thanks to the heavens were that Nagato’s eyes did not show fear or horror, but glistened like those of a sister who was reunited with her supposedly-dead brother on a downtown street by chance. At least it didn’t seem she was going to report the incident. In the midst of such panic, this was the only tiny source of relief.

Why don’t you sit? I started, but realized that I had taken Nagato’s chair. Should I give her the seat, or should I unfold another chair? Oh, and she might not want to sit near me.

“Sorry.”

With one more apology, I stood up. Taking one propped up folded chair aside, I moved to the center of the room. Judging an ample distance from Nagato, I unfolded and sat on the chair, and continued to hold my head in my hands.

This was just one small literature club. One day in May, Haruhi dragged me here like a berserk industrial robot, and we met Nagato for the first time. The room I saw at that first encounter was exactly like this. At that time, this room was only equipped with the tables, the chairs, the

bookshelves and Nagato. Since that time, miscellaneous accessories began to appear, all because Haruhi had announced, “From now on this will be our club room!” Among the accessories were a portable heater, a kettle, a clay pot, a fridge, a desktop…

“Wait.”

I removed my hands from my head.

Wait. What was here again?

A hanger rack, a water heater, a teapot, teacups, an old radio cassette player…

“Not these.”

Search for items that didn’t exist in the room before it turned into SOS Brigade’s den, existed afterwards, and exist now in this room!

“The desktop!”

The model was definitely different. Only the power cord crawled on the floor, so most likely it was not connected to the internet. However this was the only item that caught my attention. It was the only answer to the “Spot the Difference” game. (translator note: Referring to the game to catch differences between two pictures.)

Nagato was still standing. Her eyes were fixed on me for a long time, as if I were worthy of full alert. But when I turned my face towards her, her gaze immediately dropped to the floor. Taking a better look, I could actually see a blush of red again around her cheeks. Hey… Nagato. This isn’t you! You never let your eyes wander and your face be reddened in confusion!

Maybe it was futile, but I pretended to be unperturbed as I stood up, in an attempt to not alert her.

“Nagato,”

I pointed to the back of the desktop.

“Could I play with this for a bit?”

Nagato’s expression was first shocked, and turned little by little into perplexity, as her eyes darted between me and the desktop a few times. She inhaled deeply.

“One moment.”

Clumsily she brought her chair in front of the desktop, pushed the switch on the main unit and sat down.

To boot up the operating system, it took as long as it took to cool down a hot can of coffee, just purchased, to a temperature cats could drink. After a sound resembling a squirrel's nibbling of tree roots finally came to a stop, Nagato swiftly operated the mouse, which I guessed was to move or delete files. Maybe there was something she didn't want others to see. I understood her feelings. I wouldn't want anybody to see the MIKURU folder either.

"Here you go."

In a small voice Nagato said without looking at me, left her seat and stood guard at the wall.

"Sorry for the trouble."

Settled on the seat, I quickly peered into the screen, and used all the techniques I could muster to search for the MIKURU folder and the SOS Brigade site file. The sense of futility weighed down my shoulder.

"…Not here."

Despite everything I had done, I couldn't find the connection. The proof of Haruhi's existence was nowhere to be found.

I wondered what data Nagato had hidden earlier, but I could feel a surveillant gaze shooting from behind. The atmosphere was like she was poised for pulling the plug immediately as soon as the not-to-be-seen data was about to be discovered.

I stood up from my seat.

The computer probably didn't contain any hints. What I really wanted to see was neither Asahina-san's photo gallery nor the SOS Brigade website. I was hoping to see a hint message from Nagato displayed, just like the time when Haruhi and I were imprisoned in the Sealed Reality. My hope was shot down mercilessly.

"Sorry for the fuss."

I apologized with a tired voice, and turned to the door. I'm going home. Then I'm going to bed.

Then something surprising happened.

"Wait."

Nagato pulled out a coarse piece of paper from a gap in a bookshelf, and stood in front of me hesitantly. With her eyes looking around the knot of my necktie, she spoke.

"If it's fine with you…"

She held out a hand.

“Take this.”

The paper handed to me was a blank club sign-up form.

Well.

I should at least be thankful that I had already encountered all sorts of absurdity by now. Otherwise, I would, without a doubt, be running around looking for a counselor.

Examining the situation, either I had become nuttier than a fruitcake, or the world was completely off its tracks, but now I could almost cross out the former possibility. I am always the sober one, and I acknowledge myself as the levelheaded tsukkomi commentator towards everything under the Sun. Hey, I can butt in a comment even to this incomprehensible world, like this: Nandeyanen?/What the heck?

“…”

I grew silent, Nagato-style. In many ways, it turned a little cold. There was a limit to all my faked courage.

Nagato had turned into a bespectacled book-loving girl. Asahina-san had turned into a foreign senior. Koizumi had never transferred to North High, probably still studying somewhere else.

What on earth was this?

Did it mean I was to start over from the very beginning? If so, wasn’t the season off? If it were a reset, it should have returned to the very beginning… which meant returning to the first day of high school life, didn’t it? I had no idea who pressed the reset button, but changing only the environmental settings while keeping the time flow intact was just plain confusing, you know! Look at me now, completely disoriented and bewildered. I had thought that role was reserved only for Asahina-san!

And where was that other girl now? Where was that dumbass, getting away with her comfortable life, while I was out in the cold, in such a place?

Where is Haruhi?

Where are you?

Show your face, now! Is this unnerving or what?

“…Damn. Why do I need to search for you?”

Or, don’t you exist at all here, Haruhi?

Stop the joke, will you!? I don't know why the heck I would think like this, but the story can't go on without you showing up! It is plain unreasonable to throw such depressing mournful emotions at just me! What's the matter with you?

With a lingering image of professional slaves carrying gigantic boulders up a slope for constructing a mausoleum, I looked up at the slightly overcast chilly sky from the connecting hallway.

The club sign-up form rustled inside my pocket.

When I returned to my bedroom, it was Shamisen and my sister who greeted me. My sister, with innocent laughter, was wielding a rod with a rumpled furball at the tip. Shamisen, lying flat on the bed, was repeatedly hit on the head by the rod. Shamisen narrowed its eyes as if it was annoyed, and sometimes raised its paws against my sister's attacks.

"Oh, welcome back~"

My sister looked up at my face with a smile.

"Dinner is about ready. Dinner-da-nya, Shami~"

Shamisen also lifted up its head, but soon gave a big yawn, and lazily fought back against my sister's continuous bristle grass attacks.

Ah, there was still one remaining hope in this.

"Hey."

I snatched the bristle grass rod, and hit my sister's forehead lightly.

"Do you remember Haruhi? How about Asahina-san? Nagato? Koizumi? Weren't we playing at the baseball match together, and appearing in the film?"

"What~, Kyon-kun? Not a clue~"

Then I held up Shamisen in my arms.

"When was this cat in this house? Who brought it here?"

My sister's round eyes became even closer to circles.

"Humm… Last month. You brought it back, Kyon-kun, didn't you? Remember? You got it from a friend who had moved abroad. Right, Shami~?"

Snatching the tri-colored cat from my arms, my sister brushed her cheek against it affectionately. Shamisen, which sleepily narrowed its eyes, looked at me from afar with an I-give-up expression.

“Give me that.”

I grabbed the cat back. Shamisen’s whiskers were shaking, apparently annoyed by being treated like merchandise. Sorry, I’ll reward you with dried food afterwards.

“I need to have a word with it. Just the two of us. So, get out of my room. Now!”

“Hey, I’d like to talk too. That’s unfair, Kyon-kun! Eh… You’re talking with Shami? Eh? Really?”

Without further answers, I lifted my sister by her waist, and dropped her outside the room. “Don’t open the door! No matter what!” I shut the door after the harsh warning.

“Mom~, Kyon-kun’s brain has turned to noodles!”

My sister could be heard walking down the stairs, saying a line which might turn out to be right.

“So, Shamisen.”

I sat cross-legged, and started talking to the precious tri-colored cat sitting on the floor.

“Okay, I told you before to stop talking no matter what. But now, never mind that. Rather, it would comfort me at this moment if you speak up. So, Shamisen. Say something. Whatever is fine. Philosophy, natural science, your choice. Even if it is difficult to understand. Please speak!”

Shamisen looked up at me with a bored face. As if bored off its ass, Shamisen began to lick its fur.

“…Do you understand what I said? Do you mean you cannot speak, but you can still listen and understand? Why not put out your right paw when it’s a Yes, and your left paw when it’s a No?”

With my palm up, I poked my hand against its nose. Shamisen smelt my fingertips for a moment, but as expected, it returned to lick its fur, without saying anything or showing any understanding.

Normal, I guess.

This cat spoke only when we shot the film, and it was only for a short moment. At the same time we stopped shooting the film, this cat turned back to a normal cat. A normal cat that could be found anywhere, and could only be associated with verbs like eat, sleep and play.

I know one thing. In this world, no cat can speak.

“Isn’t that normal?”

Exhausted, I fell flat on my back, and stretched my arms and legs. Cats don't speak. So the strange time was when Shamisen had opened up to speak, not now. Or was it?

I would just want to be a cat. Then I could quit thinking about anything, and live my life on basic instincts.

I remained in such a position, until my sister came back telling me dinner was ready.

Chapter 2

The day of December 18 finally ended as if it were stuck in a bottle of glue, and the next day began.

December 19.

From today onwards we would be having shortened lessons. The lessons should originally have been shortened much earlier, but a while ago our school had been outrun by our rival public school in the aggregated results of the national mock exam. Our principal was spewing fire and instilled forceful changes with the theme of enhancing academic performance. History does not change, after all.

There was nothing but change around me, in North High and around the SOS Brigade. As if caught up in a certain someone's arbitrary scheme, I went to school, only to find more absentees from Class 1-5. Taniguchi was nowhere to be found, probably finally reaching 40 degrees Celsius.

And today Asakura was still sitting behind me instead of Haruhi.

"Good morning. Are you awake today? Good, if that's the case."

"We'll see."

I put my bag on my table with a poker face. Asakura propped up her chin with her hands.

"But just having your eyes open doesn't necessarily mean that you are awake. Having a firm grip of the situation with your eyes would be the first step to understanding. How are you doing? Are you grasping the situation well?"

"Asakura."

I leaned forward and shot a sparkling gaze at Asakura Ryouko's finely chiseled features.

"Tell me once more: Do you really not remember or are you just playing dumb? Didn't you try to kill me before?"

Asakura's face suddenly turned gloomy, with the exact same eyes one might use to look at a patient.

"…Seems like you are still not awake. Here is my advice: Go see a doctor soon! Go before it is too late!"

She shut her lips from then on, ignoring me as she struck up a conversation with a neighboring girl.

I turned to face forward, crossed my arms, and stared straight into thin air.

Let's put it this way.

Let's say somewhere there is a very very unfortunate person. This person has been spectacularly unfortunate, whether viewed subjectively or objectively. This person is in nature the personification of misfortune, and even the elderly Prince Siddhartha who had mastered the deepest meaning of enlightenment would have turned his eyes away from this person. One day, he (this person may be a she, but I will just assume it is a he to skip the trouble) drifts into slumber while tormented by his usual misfortune, and the next day when he wakes up, the world has turned completely upside-down. It has become a world marvelous beyond words, indescribable even by the word "Utopia." In this world, his misfortune has completely been swept away, and his body and spirit are filled from head to toe with fortune in every aspect. No misfortune will fall onto his shoulders, and he must have been taken by somebody from hell to heaven in a single night.

Of course, the person's own will does not play a role here. He is taken away by somebody he does not know, and that somebody's real identity is completely unknown. It is unknown why that somebody does this to the person. Probably only heaven knows.

So, in this case, should the person be happy? By changing the world, the person's misfortune is completely gone. However, this world is a little different from his original world, and the biggest mystery remains as to what the reasoning is behind such changes.

In this case, using the best evaluation criteria available, to whom should the person express his gratitude?

With that said, this person is not me. The degree is way too different.

Well… This analogy is bad for my case, I guess. I was not exactly reaching the bottom of misfortune all the time till yesterday, and presently I am not exactly the most fortunate among all people.

However, disregarding the problem of extent, the analogy is close, if not exact in illustrating the point. My nerves had been practically rattled by the strange happenings around Haruhi all the time, and now such tales are apparently of no relevance to me.

However—

Here, there is no Haruhi, there is no Koizumi, Nagato and Asahina are normal humans, and the existence of the SOS Brigade has been completely erased. No aliens, no time travelers, no ESP. Above all, cats don't speak. It is just a normal, normal world.

So how is that?

Which world is more suited to me? Which world will delight me? The world that was, until now? Or the world now?

Am I happy now?

After school, my feet were auto-piloted towards the Literature Club Room out of habit. It is a typical reflex action — the body moves without the brain thinking when the action is repeated every day. It is the same as the sequence during bathing. There is no predetermined sequence of how to scrub the body in a bath, but from some time onwards the sequence is pieced up mechanically every single time.

Every day when classes finish, I head towards the SOS Brigade, drink tea prepared by Asahina-san, and play games with Koizumi while listening to the delirious talks from Haruhi. It may be a bad habit, but I find it hard to kick, even if I am told to, exactly because it is a bad habit.

Therefore today the ambiance is a little different.

"What shall I do with this?"

I stared at the blank application form as I was walking. Nagato gave this to me yesterday, probably implicitly encouraging me to join the Literature Club. But I don't understand; why did she invite me? Because the Literature Club has no other members and is to be disbanded? But it was courageous for her to recruit me, who literally appeared from nowhere and attacked her. Probably even in this wrong world, only Nagato never changes her somehow peculiar logic.

"Agh!"

When walking towards the club rooms block, I passed the Asahina-Tsuruya couple. Asahina-san literally recoiled upon seeing me and clung to Tsuruya-san, hiding behind her. Pained by the adorable senior's reaction upon seeing me, I briskly gave a light bow and trotted off. Oh please, let the common days come back, so I can enjoy my honeydew once more!

I knocked this time and heard a faint response. Only then did I open the door.

Nagato ran her eyes across my facial epidermis and returned them to the book in her hands. Her movement to push back her spectacles appeared to be her greeting.

"Is it all right for me to come back?"

Her small head nodded firmly. However, her eyes were more interested in the book spread in front of her, and she did not even lift her head.

I put my bag over there and darted my eyes around for the next thing I should do. However, in this nondescript room, there weren't many small gadgets I could fiddle with. So without choice my eyes landed on the bookshelf.

All of the shelves were jammed to the brim with books of all sizes. There were more hardcovers than paperbacks or novels, which was probably an indication of Nagato's preference for heavy reading.

Silence.

I should have already been accustomed to Nagato's silence, but today in this room it was quite painful. I would be on the edge of my seat if I did not say anything.

"Are all of these books yours?"

Immediately came the response.

"Some were here before I came."

Nagato showed me the cover of the hardcover she was holding.

"This is borrowed. From the public library."

On the book was a barcode sticker that showed it was the public library's property. Fluorescent light reflected off the laminated cover, and Nagato's spectacles shone for a second.

End of conversation. Nagato returned to her silent reading challenge against the thick book, and I lost my place of belonging.

The silence was unbearably choking. I searched for a random conversation thread and threw out random words.

"Do you write your own essays?"

After that was 3/4 of a beat of silence.

"I just read."

Her eyes flitted for a fraction of a second onto the computer before hiding behind the lenses, but that did not escape my eyes. I see. That was why Nagato needed to do something before letting me use the computer. I developed an irresistible urge to read the story Nagato wrote. What would she have written? Probably sci-fi. It wouldn't be a love story, would it?

"…"

It was hard to get into a conversation with Nagato in the first place. In this way, this Nagato was no different.

I restarted my silent operations with the bookshelf.

Somehow my eyes stopped on the spine of a book.

It was a familiar title. The time when the SOS Brigade sprouted, Nagato lent me this first volume of a long foreign sci-fi series, a book with a scary amount of words.(ED note: Dan Simmons's Hyperion according to the anime) Now that I mention it, Nagato was still a spectacled girl then, and she pushed this book onto me without allowing any excuses. "Take this," she threw those words behind her and left briskly. It took me two weeks to read the whole thing. For me it seemed like years ago when this happened. Too many things had happened in the meantime.

Strange nostalgic sentiments grew, and I took the hardcover from the bookshelf. I was not standing and reading in a bookstore, so I was not really putting any effort into reading. I randomly flipped over the pages and was about to put the book back in its original position when a small rectangular piece of paper dropped beside my feet.

"Hmmm?"

I picked it up. It was a bookmark with flowery drawings. It looked like one of those bookmarks that bookstores would throw in without asking — bookmark?

It was as if the world began to spin around me. Ah… At that time… I opened this book in my bedroom… Found the same bookmark… Then I dashed off on my bike… I could recite the phrase from the back of my head.

Seven o'clock tonight, waiting for you at the park outside the station.

Holding my breath, I rotated my shaking hands — and I saw.

"Program Run Condition: Collect the keys. Deadline: Two Days Later."

The sentence, as if it were a message from some time ago, was written in computer-font-like neat characters on the bookmark that fell out from the hardcover.

At once, I turned and hurried to the front of Nagato's table in three steps. Fixing my gaze on her widening black pupils, I asked, "Did you write this?"

Staring at the back of the bookmark I held out for a while, Nagato cocked her head. In a puzzled expression she replied, "It is similar to my writing. However… I don't know. I do not remember writing that."

"… I see. Just as I thought. Well, it's alright. I would be troubled if you knew. There is something bothering me, you know. Oh well, never mind my babbling…"

Babbling lines of excuses from my mouth, I felt like my mind had flown somewhere else.

Nagato.

So this is a message from you all right. It is just a drab and dry line of characters, but I am glad. May I treat it like a present from the Nagato I have known for long? It's a hint how to break the current situation, right? Otherwise you would not write such a reminder-like comment?

Program. Condition. Keys. Deadline. Two Days Later.

…Two days later?

Today was the 19th. Should I count two days later from this exact moment onwards? Or should I count from yesterday, when the whole world started to go crazy? Worse comes to worst, the deadline would be tomorrow the 20th.

The one-shot surprise gradually cooled off like magma that oozed at a slow pace out of the earth's crust. I don't know a thing, but it sounds like I have to gather some keys in order to boot some programs. But what are the keys? Where are they dropped off? How many of them are there? After collecting them all, where should I bring them in exchange for the souvenir?

Question marks hovered in swarms above my head, and finally joined into one large question mark.

If I start up this program, will the world return to normal?

Hurriedly I took books in and out of the shelves starting from the far end, and checked if there were other bookmarks sandwiched within. Bearing Nagato's astounded gaze I kept on digging, but to no avail. There were no others.

"Just this one, huh?"

Well, if one gets too greedy for too much and grabs for every souvenir he can find, the weight would in the end bring him down, back to square one. Moving at random without a fixed goal is a mere waste of both time and HP. First thing's first; get the keys. The summit was still far away, but at least I managed to spot the pointer sign.

After asking for permission, I unpacked my lunchbox and settled diagonally from Nagato. Munching my lunch, I also unpacked my mind of thoughts. Nagato seemed to direct her eyes from time to time in my direction, but I just operated my chopsticks mechanically, and concentrated on the urgent matter at hand — to continue feeding nutrients sedulously into my brain cells.

As time ticked by, my lunchbox emptied. I was about to order some tea when I realized that Asahina-san was not with us. I was frustrated, but I continued thinking. This was the moment of truth. I could not let this hard-earned hint go to waste. Key. Key. Key. Key…

For probably two hours, I was immersed in red-hot brainstorming.

Filled gradually with disgust towards my own stupidity, I was overwhelmed by dejection.

"I don't get it at all!" I cursed myself under my breath.

The keys were too ambiguous to begin with. No way would it mean real keys for locking and unlocking, so my guess was that they were keys like keywords or key personnel. But the scope was still too large. Was it an item or a phrase? Was it mobile or immobile? I would certainly want to ask for further hints like these. I tried to picture what Nagato was thinking when she was writing on the bookmark, but I could only imagine her reading a difficult book, or giving an impressive but painfully long dictum — just the Nagato that I had known all along.

With a sudden interest I turned my head in a diagonal direction, and there was the motionless Nagato, as if she was taking a snooze. Probably it was just me, but she was staying on the same page without progress. However, as counter-evidence that she was not taking an afternoon nap, her cheeks began to get a brush of red as she took notice of my absent-minded gaze. This Nagato the Literature Club member was either terribly shy in nature, or unaccustomed to others' attention.

On the outside she looked exactly the same, but she kept reacting in an unfamiliar way that stimulated my interest. Deliberately, I fixed my eyes on her in observation.

"…"

Though her eyes' focus was on the pages, it was clear she was not reading a single word. Nagato gasped silently with her lips slightly apart, and her chest's subtle heaving rhythm became gradually visible. The faint blush around her cheeks became redder by the minute. To tell the truth, this Nagato was quite — no, very cute. Though just for a moment, an idea flashed across my mind: It might not be such a bad idea to just join the Literature Club and enjoy the whole new world without Haruhi.

But no. I would not throw in the towel just yet. I took out the bookmark from my pocket and gripped it without crushing it. Slipping this bookmark into this world meant that the Nagato who read with a triangular hat on still had some business with me. I had some business myself as well! I hadn't tried Haruhi's handmade dishes. I hadn't burnt Asahina Santa's image on my retina. My game with Koizumi was halted on my advantage as he was busy decorating the room. I would win in the end if we continued like that, so I would lose my rightful hundred yen otherwise.

The setting sun shone through the window, and time had come for it to hide behind the campus block as a huge orange ball.

I grew tired fixating on my seat, and nothing beneficial would come out of my brain no matter how much harder I wrung it. I stood up and reached for my bag.

“Let’s call it a day.”

“Okay.”

Nagato closed her hardcover which she might have been reading or not, stuffed it in her bag and stood up. Was she by any chance waiting for me to say it aloud?

I grabbed my bag. She did not move an inch, as if she would forever stay still until I stepped out first.

“Hey, Nagato?”

“What?”

“You live alone, don’t you?”

“…Yes.”

She was probably thinking, how on earth did he know that?

I was about to ask whether she lived with her family, but stopped short when I saw her eyelashes cast down subtly. Memories of her room void of almost all furnishing came back to me. My first visit was seven months ago, and the cosmic telepathic talk on a scale that knew no bounds was in many ways plain scary. The second visit was Tanabata three years ago, and I was with Asahina-san. The second visit happened earlier on the timeline than the first visit, which is some accomplishment to me.

“How about keeping a cat? Cats are great! They may look flaccid all the time, but sometimes I just wonder if they can understand what I am saying. I wouldn’t be surprised if there are cats that can speak. I am not joking here.”

“Pets prohibited.”

After the response, she grew silent for some time, fluttering her eyes in sorrow. Like the sound of the wind from a soaring swallow, she took in a breath, and spoke in a brittle voice.

“Want to come?”

Nagato looked at my fingernails.

“Where?”

My fingernails asked back.

“My home.”

A half-note rest of silence.

“…Can I?”

What on earth had happened? Was she shy, timid, or aggressive? This Nagato’s psychological curve was just discontinuous! Or, is the mentality of an average high school girl nowadays just as irregular as the light curve period of Mira A?

“Sure.”

Nagato stepped out, escaping from my sight. She turned off the room lights, opened the door and disappeared into the corridor.

Of course, I followed. Nagato’s room. Room 708 in a luxury apartment. I would just take a peek at the living room. I might find some new hints there.

If I found another me sleeping there, I would wake him at once with my fist.

On the way back from school, Nagato and I didn’t talk at all.

Nagato only walked straight ahead down the slope in silence, stepping as if some strong chilling wind was beating against her. Her hair was ruffled, blown about by sudden gusts of wind. Looking at the back of her head, I only continued to move my legs matter-of-factly. There were not many topics I felt right to talk about, and I sensed that I had better not ask why I was invited.

After walking for some time, Nagato finally stopped her tracks in front of the luxury apartment. How many times had I visited here? I had visited Nagato’s room twice, Asakura’s room once, and the rooftop once. Punching the password into the entrance’s keylock, Nagato unlocked the doors and stepped into the lobby without even looking back.

She was even silent in the elevator. At the eighth room on the seventh floor she inserted the key into the door and opened it, but even then she only invited me in with a gesture.

I walked in without a word. The room’s arrangement was not different from my memory’s impression. It was just one nondescript room. There was no other furnishing in the living room except a kotatsu. As usual, there were not even any curtains.

And then there was the guest room. It should be the room separated by a slide door.

“May I take a look in this room?”

I asked Nagato, who went out of the kitchen with a Japanese tea set. Nagato blinked slowly.

“Go ahead.”

“Sorry for intruding.”

The slide door slid open, as if there were bearings attached to it.

“…”

There were only tatami mats inside.

Well, I should have guessed. There was no way I could have traveled to the past so many times.

I slid the door back to its original position, and showed my open hands to Nagato who was watching over me. The gesture must have meant nothing to her. However, without a word, Nagato put two tea cups on the kotatsu table, sat up straight with her legs tucked under her, and started to pour tea.

I sat opposite to her with my legs crossed, the same position I sat in when I visited her for the first time. I had meaninglessly drunk several cups of tea prepared by Nagato, and then listened to that monologue about the universe. It had been a season of fresh greens and extreme heat, a completely different dimension from the current coldness. Even my heart was more chilled now.

Drinking tea face-to-face in silence, Nagato’s eyes drooped down behind her spectacles.

For some reason Nagato was hesitating. Her mouth opened, but then shut. She looked up at me as if she had gathered her courage, but then looked down again. She repeated this a couple of times. Finally, she put her teacup aside and forced her voice out with great effort.

“I met you before.”

As if in addition,

“Outside school.”

Where?

“Do you remember?”

What?

“Library.”

Upon hearing this word, the gear at the back of my brain squeaked into action. The memory in the library with Nagato popped up. It was the inaugural first Search for the Mysterious.

"This May,"

Nagato drooped her eyes,

"You helped me make a library card."

My psyche was electrocuted by a bolt, and failed to function.

…Yes. Otherwise you would have been stuck in front of the bookshelves! Haruhi's summoning came like prank calls, and there was no other way to bring us back to the gathering point quickly…

"You…"

However, as Nagato continued to explain, I found her description of the situation different from my impression. Here was Nagato's explanation using her faint murmuring voice:

Around mid-May Nagato visited the city library for the first time, but she did not know how to create a library card. It would have been good enough if she asked one of the librarians, but the few librarians were all busy. Moreover, as an introvert who was bad with words, Nagato could not bring up her courage to ask, so she started to wander around the counter in vain. Probably unable to stand watching her like that, a high school boy who passed by volunteered all the procedures in her place.

"That was you."

Nagato turned her face towards me, and our eyes met for half a second, before she dropped her eyes again on the kotatsu.

"…"

The dot-dot-dot was shared between Nagato and me. Silence returned to the void of the living room, but I could not come up with any words. That was because I could not possibly answer her question whether I could remember. My memory and hers were subtly different. It was true that I created the library card for her, but I was not a passer-by; instead, I was the one who took her to the library in the first place. Giving up on the Search for the Mysterious patrol that was doomed to fail, we chose to go to the library to loiter away our time. Even if my ability to remember was as tiny as an infant sea anemone, I could never forget the image of the silent Nagato in uniform.

"…"

Unsure of how to deal with my silence, Nagato twitched her lips with a tinge of sorrow, and made circles around the teacup rim with her slender finger. Watching the barely visible shaking of her finger, I was even more withdrawn from bringing up any topic, and the silence thickened.

It would be simple to just answer that I remembered. It would not be a plain lie. There were just some gaps from the truth. In this case, these gaps became the biggest issues at hand.

Why was there such a difference?

The alien I had known had gone off to somewhere else, leaving behind only a bookmark.

Ding-dong!

The intercom bell broke the eternal silence. I nearly jumped in my sitting posture upon the sudden sound. Nagato's body was shocked with surprise, and turned towards the entrance.

The bell rang again. A new visitor had arrived. However, who on earth would visit Nagato's room? I could not imagine a single person except a delivery man or a bill collector.

"…"

Like a soul just detached from its body, Nagato stood up and slid towards the wall without even the sound of footsteps. She punched some keys into the intercom panel and listened to somebody's voice. Then she turned to me with a slightly troubled expression.

Nagato spoke softly over the speaker, probably uttering rejections like "But…" and "Well…"

"Wait."

Apparently Nagato was overpowered. She hovered towards the entrance and unlocked the door.

"Look at who is here?"

The girl barged in with her shoulder against the door.

"Why are you here? That's new — Nagato-san bringing in a guy."

The girl in a North High uniform was holding a pot with both hands, and skillfully took off her shoes by pressing her toes against the door sill.

"Don't tell me you forced yourself in!"

Tell me first, why you are here in the first place? It is a surprising scene to see your face outside the classroom!

“I am like a volunteer. It is a real surprise to see you here!” The beautiful face turned into a smile.

She was the class representative that sat behind me.

In other words, Asakura Ryouko had called in.

“I probably made too much. It was so hot and heavy!”

Smiling, Asakura put the large pot on the kotatsu. If one dropped by the convenience store in this season he would be greeted by this smell as well. There was oden in the pot. Was it made by Asakura?

“Exactly. I share something like this, which does not take much time to prepare in large quantities, with Nagato-san from time to time. If you left her alone, she would just be malnourished.”

Nagato went into the kitchen to prepare plates and chopsticks. Some clanging of dishes could be heard.

“So? May I ask now why you are here? That interests me.”

I ran out of words. I was here because Nagato invited me, but I don’t know why I got invited. Because of the story about the library? It would be just fine to talk about that in the club room. For me, I obediently came because I thought there might be some hints here as to what the “keys” were, but I could not just say that out loud. It would be bad to make her worry if I have mental problems.

I made up a random lie.

“Well… Sure. I went home along the same route with Nagato… Yeah, I am a little troubled whether I should join the Literature Club now. So I walked with her, asking for her opinions. We arrived at the apartment, but the discussion was still unfinished, so she invited me in. I was not forcing myself in.”

“You, in the Literature Club? Pardon me, but I cannot see the match anywhere. Do you even read books? Or do you want to write them?”

“My trouble is whether I should be reading or writing from now on. That’s all.”

The pot lid had been lifted, and an appetite-seducing aroma filled the whole room from the kotatsu. The boiled eggs that floated and sank in the sauce had turned a great color.

Asakura-san, who sat up straight with legs folded at the left corner, threw suspicious glances at me. It might be just me, but the glances were so sharp, if they had weight, my temple would have lots of small holes. The Asakura before turned into a serial killer midway, but for this Asakura, one could discern the deep-rooted confidence behind her dignified posture. There was no doubt this oden would be far more delicious than any other on earth. That aura put pressure on me. At this moment, I was running out of confidence in many ways. I was just wandering back and forth, nothing else.

Unable to take it anymore, I grabbed my bag and stood up.

"Oh, so you are not eating with us?"

Meeting Asakura's jeering tone with silence, I decided to retreat from the living room in stealthy footsteps.

"Oh."

I nearly bumped into Nagato who was coming out from the kitchen. In Nagato's hands was a stack of small plates, with chopsticks and a tube of ground mustard on top.

"I am leaving. Sorry for intruding. See you."

I was about to walk off, when I sensed a tug as soft as a feather on my arm.

"…"

Nagato was pulling my sleeve with her fingers. The tug was very soft, just like how much force one might use to pick up a newborn baby hamster.

It was a faint expression. Nagato just looked down while touching my sleeve with only her fingers. Was it that she did not want me to leave? Was it that she felt suffocated being alone with Asakura? In any case I was fine with it, especially when I saw such a bitterly desperate Nagato.

"…Just kidding! I'm gonna eat! Oh my, I am starving! If I do not have something in my stomach right now I couldn't even survive on my way home!"

Her fingers withdrew at last. I missed the scene somehow. Normally there was no way I could see Nagato expressing her ideas so apparently. This moment had value in its scarcity.

Watching me hovering back to the living room, Asakura narrowed her eyes, as if she had understood it all.

I focused wholly on stuffing oden into my mouth. My taste buds screamed from the delicious pleasure, but the bottom of my heart failed to recognize exactly what I was eating. Nagato's focus was on her every tiny chew, and she took almost three minutes just to chew and swallow her tangle (konbu). Among the three of us, only Asakura was talking cheerfully and I bounced back half-hearted answers at her from start to end.

As if having a bivouac outside the Gate of Hell, the meal went on for more than an hour, and my shoulders had grown very stiff.

Finally, Asakura stood up.

"Nagato-san, please put the remaining portions in another container and put it in the freezer. I will come to get the pot tomorrow, so please keep the pot till then."

I followed her. It was like being released from all bindings. Giving an ambiguous nod, Nagato drooped her eyes as she saw us off at the door.

I confirmed that Asakura had left first before I whispered to Nagato.

"See you. Can I visit the club room tomorrow too? I have nowhere else to go to after school."

Nagato fixed her eyes on me, and…

…Gave a faint but definite *smile*.

I was literally dazzled.

During the elevator's descent, Asakura chuckled.

"Hey, do you like Nagato-san?"

Well, it's not that I hate her. Choosing between Like or Hate, I would choose the former, but I have no reason to hate her in the first place. She is my savior. Yup. Asakura, it is Nagato Yuki who saved me from that murderous blade of yours, so how can I hate her?

… I could not say the above. This Asakura was not that Asakura, and the same went for Nagato. In this world I seemed to be the only one that had a different perspective on things, and everybody else had turned normal. There was no SOS Brigade at all.

How did this beautiful classmate of mine interpret my silence to her question? She just laughed through her nose.

“No way, I see. I’ve been reading too much, I guess. Your favorite type would be much more on the weird side, and Nagato-san just doesn’t fit the profile.”

“How do you know my favorite type?”

“I just happened to hear that from Kunikida-san. You were in the same class in junior high, right?”

That bastard, nosing around with such crap. That was just Kunikida’s misconception. Please ignore.

“But you! If you want to date Nagato-san, you’d better be serious about it. Otherwise, I will never forgive you! Nagato-san might look otherwise, but she is emotionally fragile inside.”

Why is Asakura paying so much attention to Nagato? In my original world, Asakura was Nagato’s backup — that I would understand. Well, in the end she ran berserk and was deleted though.

“It is a friendship fostered by living in the same apartment block. Somehow I just cannot leave her alone. Looking at her from afar, I sense her in danger. And somewhere within me grew the desire to protect her, see?”

I might have gotten her meaning, or I might not have.

The conversation ended there, and Asakura left the lift on the fifth floor. Room 505, I remember.

“See you tomorrow.”

Asakura’s smiling face was shut away behind the closing doors.

I stepped out of the apartment block, and the dark atmosphere outside was as chilling as a fresh food freezer. The north wind snatched from my body something else along with my body heat.

I thought about greeting the old caretaker, but then decided not to. The caretaker station’s glass windows were firmly shut, and it was dark inside. He was probably asleep.

I would just like to return to bed as soon as possible. Even a dream would be fine with me. That girl could just as easily get into others’ dreams subconsciously.

“You are just trouble whether you are here or not, so just get the hell out here in such a critical moment! Can’t you just listen to my wish for once…?”

I whispered to the starry sky, and suddenly recognized with a shock what I had been thinking about. I would like to hit myself hard on the head for daring to think such sinister ideas.

“What on earth…”

The murmur from my mouth turned to white breath and dispersed into thin air.

I wanted to see Haruhi.

Chapter 3

December 20th.

It was the morning of the third day since the world had changed as I awoke from my dreamless slumber. As usual, I got out of bed, feeling as though my stomach had been stuffed with a few dozen .300mm bullets. Shamisen, who was sleeping on the blanket, rolled off suddenly onto the ground and laid flat. I stepped softly on his tummy and sighed.

Sticking her head through the door, my sister looked dismayed when she saw that I had awoken.

“So, did Shami talk?”

She had been asking me this ever since the night before last. My answer was always the same.

“No~pe.”

As I reminisced about the soft touch of the cat’s fur on my toes, my sister had begun humming her little song as she carried Shamisen out of the room. It’s great being a cat, all they ever do is eat, sleep and lick fur. How I wanted to trade places with him for a day. Who knows, as a cat, I might even find what I was looking for in no time.

That’s right, I still hadn’t found the key. Nor had I found out what this key meant. Not to mention the system activation program. If I didn’t do something today, the world would continue to remain this way, and it might even become more terrifying. As for the time limit - whose idea was it to have such a limit anyway? Was it already a pain for Nagato to provide a limited time offer?

I headed to school without making any progress. The gloomy skies looked as though it was about to snow as it loomed above everyone’s heads. Seemed like we’d be getting a white Christmas this year; snow fall could be heavy. There hadn’t been much forecast on the amount of snow, but judging by the frostiness of this year’s winter, it’d probably be big. Haruhi would probably be more excited than a puppy dog as she prepares for the winter field trip… That is, if Haruhi still exists.

There was nothing worth my attention as I climbed up the slope as usual towards North High and finally arrived at the 1-5 classroom. My exhaustion manifested physically as I walked slowly, so I only managed to sit down on my desk just in time for the first school bell to ring. Like yesterday, there were a lot of sick absentees in class, but what was amazing was that Taniguchi only needed to rest for one day. Though he was still wearing his mask, he came nevertheless. It was only now that I realized that this guy loved going to school.

By the way, today Asakura, who sat behind me, gave me a rather intriguing smile.

“Good morning.”

Asakura greeted me simply like she did everyone else. I merely nodded back.

As the second bell signalled the beginning of classes, Okabe-sensei entered energetically and began the home room session in earnest.

I'd lost track of what day of the week it was already. Today's timetable seemed different from what I remembered, though I wasn't sure. I wasn't even sure whether I was having the same subjects on this day last week. Even if yesterday's and today's timetables were to be swapped, I'm afraid I would barely notice. Was it just I that had become weird? The girl known as Suzumiya Haruhi never existed, Asakura was the most popular classmate, Asahina-san was the unreachable senpai, while Nagato was the sole member of the Literature Club.

Just which was the real thing? Was the SOS Brigade and everything I'd been through all a part of my imagination?

Damn, my thoughts are becoming more and more negative.

During PE in the first session, I was the absent-minded goalkeeper who was not interested in defending his goal; the next session was math, everything just went in my left ear and out of my right; without even realizing, recess had arrived.

As I slumped onto my desk to cool my head down…

"Yo, Kyon,"

It was Taniguchi. He hung his mask beneath his chin and gave his usual idiotic grin.

"The next session's chemistry, today the teacher's gonna pick my row to answer questions, help me out."

Help you out? Are you nuts?! You do realize we both know each others' strengths and weaknesses inside out already, don't you? How am I supposed to know something that you wouldn't know?

"Hey, Kunikida,"

I called my other partner, who had just returned from the bathroom,

"Tell Taniguchi everything you know about sodium hydroxides. He especially wants to know whether they're on good terms with hydrochloric acids."

"Well that's simple, they get neutralized after being mixed together,"

Kunikida said as he flicked through Taniguchi's textbook,

“Ah, so it’s this question. First calculate in moles and you’ll be able to convert it to kilograms. Let me think…”

Seeing a knowledgeable person explaining so casually, one feels extremely helpless.

Taniguchi nodded his head non-stop, yet as Kunikida thought further, he didn’t intend to calculate on his own anymore. He grabbed my mechanical pencil from my desk and scribbled a few numbers and symbols on the blank spaces on Taniguchi’s textbook.

After it was all settled, Taniguchi gave me a weird smile,

“Kyon, Kunikida told me everything during the soccer match in PE, you seemed to be up to something the day before yesterday.”

Weren’t you at school as well that day?

“I had to take a nap in the clinic during lunch, and I was feeling drowsy that whole afternoon. I only heard about it this morning. I hear you were in a state of frenzy, did you really say Asakura wasn’t supposed to exist?”

“More or less.”

I held my hand up and made a sign that read, “You can get lost now!” Yet Taniguchi smirked and continued,

“How I wished I was there as well. It’s pretty rare to see you yelling around hilariously.”

Kunikida seemed to remember something from then and said,

“Kyon’s better today. That day it seems as though he had wanted to pick on Asakura-san. Did she do something to upset you?”

Even if I said it I’d be treated as a lunatic. So it was pretty natural for me to keep quiet.

“Oh yeah, you said then that someone had been replaced by Asakura. Did you find that person? Her name’s Haruhi, right? Just who is she?”

Would you please stop reminding me about this stuff? Right now I would shiver involuntarily every time that name is mentioned, even if it’s being uttered repeatedly by a parrot.

“Haruhi?”

You see? Even Taniguchi has bent his head. Not only that, he even said,

“That Haruhi, you don’t mean Suzumiya Haruhi, do you?”

Yes, that Suzumiya Haruhi……

The bones in my neck made a creaking noise. I slowly turned my head up to look at the silly look my classmate was giving me,

“Taniguchi, what did you just say?”

“I said Suzumiya, the Savage Girl of East Junior High. I’ve been in the same class as her for three years. Wonder how she’s doing…… And how come you know who she is? You said she was replaced by Asakura, just what was that all about?”

My eyes went white in an instant……

“YOU! YOU SMOOTH-HEADED IDIOT!”

I yelled and leaped up at once. Perhaps intimidated by my sudden outburst, both Taniguchi and Kunikida instinctively backed up a bit.

“Who are you calling ’smooth-headed!?’ If I’m ‘smooth-headed,’ then you’re ‘barren-headed!’ Besides, my family has been silver-haired for generations, you should be the one more worried about your hairline!”

That’s none of your business! I grabbed Taniguchi by his collar and pulled him towards my face until both our noses nearly touched each other.

“You said you know Haruhi!?”

“How can I not know her? I couldn’t forget her even after fifty years. If there’s anyone from East Junior High that doesn’t know her, they need a check-up to see if they’re suffering from amnesia.”

“Where?”

As though chanting a mantra, I fired question after question,

“Where’s that girl? Where is Haruhi right now? Tell me where!”

“What’s with you? Are you a taiko drum? Did you see Suzumiya somewhere and fell in love with her at first sight? Give it up! I’m only saying this for your own good. While her looks are the stuff of a guy’s dreams, her attitude is enough to shatter those dreams to oblivion. For example, she……”

Drew mysterious geometric shapes in the school's track field with white chalk, right? I knew that already. I'm not interested in her past criminal record, I just want to know where the hell Haruhi is right now!

"She's at Kouyouen School,"

Taniguchi replied as though reciting the atomic sequence of hydrogen,

"If I'm not mistaken, she's enrolled in the high school at the bottom of the hill, just in front of the station. She's already a bright person, so it's only natural that she would study in such an elite high school."

Elite school?

"Is Kouyouen really that good? I thought they were a girl's school for the rich and famous."

Taniguchi looked at me with pitiable eyes and said,

"Kyon, I don't know what they told you in junior high, but that school's always been co-ed. Not to mention it's one of the top schools in university entrance rate in this prefecture. To have such a school in our district really pisses me off!"

As I listened to Taniguchi's mumblings, I slowly loosened my hands.

Why did I not realize this before? I should commit seppuku for this.

Just because Haruhi wasn't at North High, I assumed that she didn't exist in this world. As you can see, my imagination was worse than that of a giant cave cricket. When I return to my relatives' place in the countryside next summer, I should go and have a chat with one of its relatives sitting by the balcony, we'll probably get along very well.

"Hey! Get a hold of yourself!" Taniguchi tidied his collar and said, "Kunikida, you're right. He is nuts, and his condition seems to have worsened."

Say whatever you like, I'm not in the mood to argue with you right now, because right now there was someone who was pissing me off more than the backstabbing Taniguchi and the ever-nodding Kunikida.

This series of unfortunate events was truly unbelievable. If someone from East Junior High was sitting nearby that day, or if Taniguchi was in the classroom then, then I would have heard Haruhi's name loud and clear much earlier. Just whose damn fault is it? Come on out so I can beat the crap out of that bastard! This score can be settled another day, though. Everything that needs answers has been asked, all that's left is to take action.

"Where're you going, Kyon? The bathroom?"

I turned around while rushing towards the classroom door and said,

“I’m taking leave early.”

As early as possible,

“What about your bag?”

That’ll just get in the way,

“Kunikida, if Okabe asks, tell him I’ve got bubonic plague with dysentery, or flu, or something like that and it hurts like hell. Oh and Taniguchi!”

I gave my sincere gratitude to my wide-jawed classmate, who was seeing me off,

“Thanks!”

“Huh? Wha……?”

I last saw Taniguchi spinning his finger by his head in circles, I then bolted out of the classroom, and within a minute I was out of the school gates.

It was really difficult to run down a slope at a high speed. Because I was too excited, I ran with all my strength, after about ten minutes, even my legs and lungs were beginning to complain that I was pushing them too hard, let alone my heart. Come to think of it, I could have still made it if I waited for the third session to finish. At this time of year, Kouyouen was probably having a half school-day as well. It would have been fine as long as I arrived there before their last school bell rang. Even if I were to walk from North High, it would still take me less than half an hour.

By the time I realized how poor my time management skills was, I had already arrived at the private school by the station, the finishing point of my compulsory daily climbing route to school. It was very quiet inside the school, were they still having classes? I took a look at my watch, the lessons were about the same time as our school, they’re probably in the third session right now. In other words, before the school gates open, I have one whole hour of free time. Being empty handed under this cold weather, all I could do was wait.

“Maybe I should forcefully barge in……”

If it were Haruhi, she would do exactly that, and she would have handled it beautifully. Sadly I don’t have that confidence, after walking slowly towards the gate, I frantically turned around once again. Standing outside the closed school gates was a stern-faced guard. As expected from a rich private school.

Actually, I could also infiltrate the school by climbing the fence, the problem was that the top of the fence stood at quite a distance from the ground, and there was barbed wire at the top to boot, it seems to be a better choice to wait for the school gates to open. If I were to forcefully go in, it'd be all over if I were to get caught. I've already come this far, I have no intention of letting the game end so easily. After all, unlike Haruhi, I can still control myself when it was necessary.

And so, I waited for nearly two hours.

The school bell that rang for the last time sounded like a distant memory, and the opened gates poured with students coming out like a released flood.

Taniguchi was correct, this was indeed a co-ed school. The girls' uniform were the same as usual, the typical black suited schoolgirl uniform. Walking amongst them were the guys on their way home, and they were dressed in the traditional gakuran uniform. This was exactly the opposite to North High, with the girls in sailor uniform and the guys in suits. As for the gender ratio, there seems to be more girls……

"How can this be…… Forget it."

There were a few familiar faces among the male students, they were the students from Class 1-9. And I had thought they'd all disappeared, turns out they were here in this high school all along. I don't know whether it's coincidence or what, but I've yet to see anyone from my junior high. Those that I've seen before didn't take much notice of me, and walked quickly past me after taking a quick suspicious look at me. Right now, they probably have a whole new set of memories, most likely a happier school memory, because at least they don't have to climb up the hill to school every day.

I continued to wait, and the chances of me hitting the jackpot were 50/50. If that girl had joined some club activity, or was busy planning something and had to stay in school, then I've basically become a scarecrow here. Please, just hurry up and be on your way home, and then appear before me.

What if there is an SOS Brigade in this Kouyouen School, with members other than myself taking part in all sorts of activities……

When I thought of this, my innards begun to tumble like mad. Wouldn't that make Asahina-san, Nagato, Koizumi, and me disposable trash? If that were the case, I'm even worse than a side-character, and would become a complete outsider. That's not what I want! I'll pray to just about anyone! Be it Jesus, Mohammad, Buddha, Mani, Zoroaster, or even Lovecraft! If any of them can ease my discomfort, I'll believe in any prophecy or legend that they preach. Even if it's by those doomsday cult preachers, I'll gladly follow them. Now I finally understand how it feels to be a person who would cling onto any piece of straw and still hopelessly sink down in a mud swamp.

After being consumed by anxiety and depression for about ten minutes,

"……Phew,"

I sighed deeply, not even I knew the meaning behind this sigh. Why was I making such a huge sigh of relief?

Because she had appeared.

Buried amongst a sea of suits and gakuran uniforms was a face I would never forget even until the moment I die.

Just like when she first introduced herself in the first day of school and clotted up the air inside the classroom, she had long hair which reached her waist. I looked stunned for some time, and then I began to count my fingers to figure out what day of the week it was. Today wasn't the day for her to let her hair down, looks like this Haruhi wasn't interested in toying around with her hair.

As though unhappy that I was in the way, the students of Kouyouen School walked past by my left and right side. I had no idea what they thought of this guy standing like an idiot in front of their school gate, but they can think whatever they want, and I don't have time to worry about what they think either.

I stood still and fixed my gaze upon the girl in her suit uniform that was slowly approaching.

Suzumiya Haruhi.

I've finally found you.

I involuntarily smiled, this was because it wasn't just Haruhi that I've found.

Walking beside Haruhi and chatting with her was a guy in a gakuran uniform. Carrying a smile that I can never stand watching was none other than Koizumi Itsuki. Now that's a surprise addition.

So these two have now gotten so close that they're now going home together after school. Yet Haruhi doesn't seem to be quite happy, her expression has remained as when I first saw her at the beginning of the school term. She would occasionally give a quick reply, and then turned her gaze back to the tarmac with a scowl on her face.

It's the girl from before. Before she even thought of creating the SOS Brigade, everywhere she went in school, she carried the expression of a martial arts master who was desperate to find a worthy opponent in order to showcase her abilities. That expression brought a sense of nostalgia for me. That was the Haruhi who was bored with the mediocrity of everyday life, and working hard to find some excitement, yet never realizing she could manifest anything she desires.

Anyway, there can always be time for reminiscences, but not now. The two of them did not seem to notice me as they slowly approached me.

As hopeless as it may sound, already I could not stop my heart from beating quickly. If I were to see a doctor now, the two-beat rhythm coming from within would be so loud that he would have to take his stethoscope off. The weather was freezing and yet I was sweating. I only hope that my trembling legs are just a part of my imagination, I was sure I'm not that cowardly.

……They're here. Haruhi and Koizumi have now arrived before me.

"Hey!"

It took me a lot of effort just to get my voice out.

Haruhi lifted her head and exchanged glances with me.

Her black stocking-filled legs then stopped walking.

"What is it?"

Her gaze was as cold as a freezer's. She scanned my whole body with that gaze before moving her eyes off,

"What do you want with me? No, I should rather ask, who are you? I'm not the sort of character to let anyone say 'Hey!' to me. If you want to flirt, go somewhere else, I don't have any interest in such activities."

As I was already mentally prepared, that didn't come as too much of a shock. As expected, this Haruhi didn't know me.

Koizumi stopped as well and looked at me with a cold stare. From his expression, I don't think he's even seeing me, let alone knowing who I am.

I turned and spoke to that Koizumi,

"Is this the first time we have met?"

Koizumi shrugged his shoulders lightly and said,

"I believe so. May I ask who you are?"

“Are you a transfer student in this school?”

“I was transferred here this spring…… How did you know I’m a transfer student?”

“Do you know anything about a group that calls itself the ‘Organization?’”

“‘Organization?’ What are you implying?”

His inoffensive smile was the trademark smile that I was familiar with. But the look on his eyes betrayed a sense of alert. Just like Asahina-san, this guy doesn’t know me.

“Haruhi,”

Haruhi’s face twitched and glared at me with her large black eyes,

“Who gave you permission to call me by my name? Just who on earth are you? I don’t remember asking for the company of perverts or stalkers. Get lost already, you’re in the way.”

“Suzumiya,”

“You’re not allowed to call me by my surname either. How did you know my name anyway? Are you from East Junior High? You must be from North High, I can tell from that uniform. Just what is a North High student doing here?”

Haruhi snorted and then turned around,

“Ignore him, Koizumi-kun. Just pretend he never existed. There’s no need to waste time on this impolite fellow, he’s just an idiot anyway. Let’s go!”

Why was Haruhi going home with Koizumi after school? Could it be that Koizumi has taken over my role in this world? Though that thought had crossed my mind for a while, but I wasn’t frantically thinking of that then.

“Wait!”

I grabbed hold of Haruhi’s shoulder as she turned to avoid me,

“Let me go!”

Haruhi turned her arm and swung my hand off. Her face was now full of anger, but that level of fierceness wasn’t enough for me to let her go now, or else all those hours standing here would be meaningless.

“You sure are annoying!”

Haruhi bent down and elegantly gave a low kick.

A pain emanated from my ankle, it was so painful that I felt like I was about to suffocate, though not enough for me to crawl around on the ground. After finding my balance, I said disconsolately,

“Just tell me one thing,”

I took out my last ounce of courage. If this doesn’t work, then I’m out of ideas. This was my last hope - I then threw out this question,

“Do you remember the Tanabata festival three years ago?”

Just as she was about to leave, Haruhi stopped once again. Looking at that long dark hair of hers, I continued,

“On that day, you sneaked into your school and drew shapes on the school field with white chalk.”

“So what about it?”

Haruhi turned with a furious look on her face,

“Everyone knows about that already! Why are you mentioning this for?”

I chose my words carefully, trying to finish it as quickly as possible,

“You weren’t alone in sneaking into school that night. You were with another guy who carried Asahina…… A little girl. It was with him that you drew the patterns using white chalk. The patterns were a message for Hikoboshi and Orihime, which roughly meant ‘I am here……’”

I wasn’t able to complete my sentence.

Haruhi grabbed my collar with her right hand and pulled me over. Being dragged by a terrifying force, I involuntarily fell forward, and knocked my forehead into Haruhi’s head, which was hard as a rock.

“Ouch!”

I looked at her in protest, and her eyes also looked back with ferociousness. Her piercing gaze now shot right into my vision. That was a nostalgic gaze, Haruhi’s exasperated face was just as nostalgic as well.

The girl looked at me with a perplexed face, her veins were close to bursting as she asked,

“How did you know that!? Who told you!? No, I never told anyone. That time……”

Haruhi suddenly stopped, her expression then changed dramatically as she saw my uniform,

“North High…… Could it be……!? What’s your name?”

I was having difficulty breathing as my tie was being grabbed tightly by her. Such a savage girl. No, now’s not the time to indulge in memories of Haruhi’s amazing power. My name? Should I tell her my real name, which she has never heard of, or should I tell her that stupid nickname that everyone has gotten used to calling me?

No matter which one it was, it would have no effect on this girl before me. I don’t think she has ever heard of those two names. In that case, there could only be one name that I can use,

“John Smith,”

Though I tried to say it calmly, it’s difficult when I’m being lifted up by the neck. Can’t you see I’m having difficulty breathing……. Just when I was thinking of that, the strong pressure before my chest was lifted at once.

“……John Smith?”

Haruhi released my collar and looked stunned as her hands stayed there in mid-air. I’ve rarely seen her like that. Suzumiya Haruhi looked as though her soul has been taken by the grim reaper, as her mouth was wide open.

“So it’s you…… You’re that John Smith? The strange high school student…… Who helped me…… In East Junior High……”

Haruhi suddenly tripped. Her long dark hair covered her eyes, and just as she was about to fall, Koizumi grabbed hold of her on time.

The link has now been connected.

What do mean ‘helped you!?’ You practically had me do everything…… But I wasn’t going to waste my time arguing with her. That’s it, I’ve finally found some clue! In this completely altered world, there was one person, and the only person, who shared the same memory as I did.

So it is you.

That person was none other than Suzumiya Haruhi.

If this Haruhi has seen me three years ago in Tanabata, then this world three years on could be traced back to that point in time. Not everything “disappears without a trace.” When I traveled back to three years ago with Asahina-san, and returned to the present with the help of Nagato’s power, that part of history did indeed exist. I don’t know what went wrong in the process, but at least three years ago, this world was the same world as the one I had known.

Just what went wrong? Why was I the only one with the original memories?

I guess I'll think about this later on.

I looked at Haruhi, whose jaw was widened as though she had seen one of the wonders of the world, and said to her,

"I'll explain everything. Do you have time? Because it's a long story……"

As the three of us walked shoulder to shoulder, Haruhi spoke,

"I've seen John Smith twice. Not long after that, as I was on my way home, I heard someone shout behind me, what did he say…… Ah, yes! Something like, 'Please take good care of the John Smith who would shake the world!' What does that mean anyway?"

I've never said such a thing. After making sure Haruhi was out of sight from the track field, I went and woke up Asahina-san and rushed towards Nagato's apartment. Could there be another John Smith? But just what the hell was that John Smith talking about?

It sounded as though he was trying to give some hint to Haruhi.

"Was that John the same John you saw in East Junior High?"

"He was too far, plus it was dark at the time. I can't remember either of their faces very well. But his voice sounded like yours, and he was wearing North High's uniform."

Things seem to be getting more and more complicated. Just when I thought I had things linked up, the details didn't fit.

We looked for a coffee shop nearby and went inside. I had wanted to go to the usual coffee shop the SOS Brigade used for their meetings, since it was a reunion of the SOS Brigade members after all. Though it was a bit far from where we were.

"This other you that I knew studied in North High, and on the first day of school, she said the following……"

Before our orders even arrived, I began my story right away. Before the cafe au lait cooled down to the point that you could drink it all in one gulp, I had told her the compressed version of everything that has happened so far, without holding back. Things like an alien, a time traveler and an esper coming together in the SOS Brigade and our club room being the Literature Club's room.

I especially told her in detail about my time traveling adventure during Tanabata, as I thought that was the most important part.

I gave Haruhi a general picture about how she was potentially a god, a time distortion, and an evolutionary possibility, as neither of these theories were confirmed. I only told her that she had an incredible power hidden within, and how this unknown power could even change the world.

Just these was enough to make this girl very interested. She constantly went into deep thought, and then finally said,

"How come you could read the alien language that I thought up? It is true that those symbols meant 'I am here, come look for me.'"

"Someone translated that for me,"

"You mean that alien?"

"To be precise, a Living Humanoid Interface created by the aliens in order to interact with humans; I remember that's how she puts it."

I told them everything about Nagato Yuki. At first glance she seemed like an extra gift from the Literature Club to the brigade, but she's actually only set up as an expressionless quiet bookworm. I then told them about Asahina-san. The serial-cosplaying mascot, as well as our public relations officer and the brigade's exclusive tea-lady was actually a time traveler from the future. It was her that I traveled back with to the Tanabata three years ago, and it was thanks to Nagato that we managed to return.

"So that means that John would be you, right? Then I'll believe you, since nothing bad would come from that. So you were engaged in time travel then……"

Haruhi looked at me with eyes used to examine a time traveler and nodded her head.

Aren't you being a bit too trusting? I never knew you would believe someone so easily. That time when it was just the two of us looking around town for mysterious stuff, you treated my story like trash when I told you in that coffee shop.

"That other me is an idiot, but I believe you,"

Haruhi leaned forward and added,

"Because believing is more fun!"

I was familiar with this very bright smile which was like a hundred flowers blossoming. This was the smile Haruhi had when I saw her smile for the first time. It was the million watt smile she had when she suddenly thought about setting up the SOS Brigade during English class.

"Since that day, I went and investigated everyone from North High. I even infiltrated there for some time, but I never did see anyone who resembled John. I was angry with myself then for not

remembering his face properly. But now it makes sense, since you hadn't even been enrolled at North High three years ago……"

There were two versions of myself back then, one was me living as a carefree junior high schooler, the other one was me being frozen in time with Asahina-san inside Nagato's guest room.

I might as well bring in the ordeals of this wonder kid here,

"In that world Koizumi is an esper. You've helped me a great deal, but you've also given me a lot of trouble,"

"If that's true, then that's pretty incredible,"

Drinking his tea elegantly, Koizumi said with a half-suspicious glance.

I turned once again towards Haruhi,

"Why didn't you come to North High?"

"No particular reason, really. I was only interested in North High because of that incident in Tanabata. But by the time I entered high school, John would have graduated already, not to mention I wasn't able to find him before. Besides, Kouyouen has a higher university entrance rate, and my home-room teacher at junior high kept nagging me to enroll there, so I simply followed along just to shut him up. Actually it doesn't really matter which high school I go to, really."

I decided to ask Koizumi as well,

"What about you? Why were you transferred here?"

"You ask me why, well, my answer's pretty much the same as Suzumiya-san's. I simply went to where my academic abilities led me. Besides, now I'm not saying North High's in any way bad, but Kouyouen was just so much better in terms of campus facilities."

True enough, North High doesn't even have air conditioning.

Haruhi sighed and said,

"The SOS Brigade, huh? ……Sounds like fun,"

All thanks to you.

"If what you said were true,"

Cutting in was Koizumi, he had now toned down his grinning smile and said with an amused look,

“Judging from your story, there exist two possibilities,”

Now that really sounds like something Koizumi would say.

“The first would be that you have entered a parallel universe, in which you have arrived from your world to this world; the second would be that the whole world has been changed except for yourself.”

I’ve thought about that as well.

“Yet, no matter which one it is, there are still questions to be answered. If it’s the former, then where did your counterpart in this world go to? If it’s the latter, it’s puzzling as to why you are the only one who remained unchanged. Unless you happen to possess some incredible power, then that would explain a lot.”

I don’t, and this I can guarantee.

Koizumi made his annoying trademark gesture by shrugging his shoulders gracefully and continued,

“If you have entered a parallel universe, then you must find a way to return to the world from where you came from. If it’s the world being completely altered, then you must find a way to restore the world to its original form. No matter which possibility it is, in order to resolve this, you have to find the culprit behind all this, since it’s possible that the culprit would know how to return things to normal.”

Who else could it be besides Haruhi?

“Who knows? Maybe it’s some invader from an alternate universe using Earth as a gaming platform. There might even be some evil mastermind that would appear in the future.”

I could tell at once that he was making up all of this as he went along, since it was obvious from his tone that Koizumi was bullshitting. Yet Haruhi didn’t notice this at all, and her eyes even glimmered as she said,

“I’d sure like to meet this Nagato-san and Asahina-san. Oh yeah, I’d also want to have a look at that club room. If it was really me that has changed the world, then maybe we would remember something if we were to meet. Don’t you think so too, John?”

Yeah, that’s right. I had no reason to object. If this girl really was behind all this - or at least that’s what I think anyway - then maybe it could trigger something within her, and even Nagato and Asahina-san would be able to remember me. Once the alien and time traveler had returned to normal, then everything else can be resolved easily. Hang on, did she just call me John?

“You said you’re called Kyon, right? John sounds better, since it feels more like a person’s name, not to mention it’s a very common Western name. Just who gave you that Kyon nickname? It doesn’t sound as though people respect you at all.”

It was my aunt who gave me that nickname, while my sister was responsible for spreading it far and wide. Despite this, I felt very satisfied at this Suzumiya complaining about it. I wonder why, as it wasn’t that long ago since I last heard that nickname.

“Then, let’s go.”

I might as well try asking,

“Now? Where to?”

Haruhi had already stood up and yelled boastfully at me,

“To North High, of course!”

In a blink of an eye, Haruhi, who couldn’t even stand waiting for the automatic door to open, had already rushed out of the coffee shop.

That was so Haruhi of her to do that, I was very relieved to see that.

Haruhi, you sure are something. Once you think of something, you’ll always get into action in less than two seconds. That’s definitely you. Every time you kick the club room door open with a bullish attitude, we would know that you would have some amazing idea to announce. Nagato seemed to be the only one who would remain calm……

“Oh shit!”

I looked at my watch. It was way past school time. I had completely forgotten about the promise I made while I was at Nagato’s apartment yesterday. I said I would go to the clubroom the next day, and yet I was late. An image floated in my head of Nagato looking depressed as she desperately waited for someone to knock on the door. Please wait a little longer. I’ll be on my way.

Koizumi picked up the bill that Haruhi left behind and said,

“So am I just paying for Suzumiya-san only?”

If you’re paying for me as well, I’ll tell you even more.

“Then, I’m all ears,”

I simply threw back everything that this esper boy has ever told me. Things like the anthropic principle, or how Haruhi is a God, as well as how he went to great lengths to stage a murder mystery on a lone island in order to keep Haruhi entertained.

Seeing Koizumi going into deep thought, I asked him,

“Could Haruhi be the culprit or is it someone else altogether? Which do you think is correct?”

“If the Suzumiya-san that you mention really does possess omnipotent powers, then it’s possible that it could be her doing,”

Well, I couldn’t think of any other person. But then, if that’s really the case, this means Haruhi has kept Koizumi by her side while casting Nagato, Asahina-san and me aside. I don’t want to sound like I’m complaining, but I just don’t believe Haruhi’s more obsessed with Koizumi than any one of us. Was this part of Haruhi’s unconscious powers at work as well?

“Does that mean I should be feeling honoured at being chosen by Suzumiya-san?”

Koizumi giggled and continued,

“After all, I…… Yes, I fancy Suzumiya-san,”

“……Are you serious!?”

You are joking!?

“I think she’s a very captivating person,”

Now where have I heard that before? Koizumi went on in a serious tone,

“Yet, Suzumiya-san is only interested in my superficial attributes. She said it was only because I’m a transfer student that she bothered to speak to me. As I’m just a normal transfer student, she seems to be getting bored of it lately. In that SOS Brigade that you mentioned, what sort of special attributes did you have? If you have none, then that means Suzumiya-san is very fond of you, that is if that Suzumiya-san is the same person as the Suzumiya-san I know,”

No matter when it was, I don’t think I’ve written into my resume any skills that would get me sent straight to a funny farm, besides the pretty useless skill of getting myself unwittingly dragged into mysterious events.

Haruhi stuck her head through the door and yelled at us with a bright smile on her face,

“Why’re you two still here? Hurry up already!”

While Koizumi waited at the counter for the waitress to count the change, I took my first step from the heat-filled coffee shop back into the cold outdoors where a single breath becomes visible.

A taxi awaited outside the entrance of the coffee shop. Seems like Haruhi had hailed it. It looks like she wanted to get to North High as soon as possible. By the way, this wasn't the mysterious black cab that Koizumi and I would occasionally ride on, but a normal yellow cab.

"To North High, full speed ahead!"

Haruhi ordered the driver as she leapt onto the cab. I followed with Koizumi and sat in the back seat. The middle-aged driver didn't wince at being ordered around by a little girl, but merely smiled squeamishly and stepped on the gas pedal.

"I don't really mind if you barge into North High," I said to the side of Haruhi's face, "But your uniform would stand out too much. Students from other schools would need a reason to get in, or it'd be troublesome if the teachers found out."

Haruhi was wearing her black suit uniform, while Koizumi was in his gakuran uniform. There weren't many students around in the afternoon since it was a half school day, but if they were to enter the territory of sailor uniformed and navy blue suit uniformed students like that, they would be openly declaring that they were from another school.

"Well, that's……"

Haruhi thought for three seconds, then said,

"John, did you have PE lesson today? No, it doesn't matter even if you didn't. Your PE uniform is placed in your classroom, right?"

Well, I was playing football during PE in the first session.

"Then, did you bring your PE uniform and track suit?"

I did, but why're you asking that for?

Haruhi smiled enigmatically,

"I will now tell you my plan for this mission. John, Koizumi-kun, lend me your ears."

Does it really matter if the taxi driver overheard everything? Yet we still obediently leaned forward and listened as Haruhi quietly laid out her mission briefings.

"That really sounds like what you'd do,"

I replied, and took a glance at Koizumi, who gave a complicated look as he grimaced.

I got off the cab nearby North High first and went back to my classroom in order to prepare for Haruhi's infiltration of North High.

By the way, the cab fare was also paid for by Koizumi. This Koizumi was basically Haruhi's walking wallet. I don't know what that poor fellow has done to her to deserve this. Could his feelings for Haruhi be romantic? I'd really like to ask just what does he fancy in Haruhi. Yet I remember Taniguchi once said that despite being eccentric, Haruhi was quite popular with the guys in junior high. That's not surprising; if she hadn't created the SOS Brigade in this school, then she would be busy shunning every guy that comes to pursue her indiscriminately. Does that mean the SOS Brigade is actually Haruhi's sanctuary? By becoming the undisputed leader of such a mysterious club, any sensible guy would automatically avoid her like a batter dodging a powerful pitch. Instead of being struck out three times and getting hit on the head by the ball, most people would prefer avoiding the ball altogether and taking it easy while walking towards the first base.

I thought this to myself while heading towards the top floor.

There weren't a lot of people in the school complex, but it wasn't entirely empty. Students who decided to stay for their club activities because they had nothing better to do at home were scattered here and there. Fortunately, the 1-5 classroom was empty. Actually I was quite afraid of being caught by Okabe-sensei. If I were him, I would want to know why someone who has decided to take the rest of the day off would want to sneak back into the classroom.

Someone decided to help out and tidied my desk, I guess it's probably Asakura. I was wondering where my books and stationery went, turns out they were put away. Only my bag hung on one side of my desk, while the leather shoes that I was looking for were hung on the other side of the desk.

"She sure has everything thought out."

I sighed at Haruhi's meticulousness as I took out the sack containing my PE uniform. Inside this huge sports bag was a short sleeve PE shirt, a pair of shorts, a trainer jacket and a pair of trousers, all of which were worn during PE in the first session. The infiltration plan that Haruhi thought up of in the cab was obviously "disguising as North High students." "Koizumi-kun would wear your PE costume, while I'll put on the jacket and trousers. Then we'll simply run through the front gate, anyone will simply think we're from the Athletics Club and have just finished our jogging. This plan is perfect."

In other words, like insects, we have to learn how to camouflage ourselves. At least it was better than having to randomly grab a guy and a girl from North High on their way home and take their clothes off.

"Well, that's not a bad idea either,"

Haruhi said nonchalantly as she stood from a corner which was quite a distance from the school gate while waiting for me.

“It’s less likely we’ll be suspected if we dress up like you. Why didn’t you tell us of this even better idea before?”

That’s highway robbery! How could I be expected to do such a thing?

Haruhi untied the ropes on my sack and mercilessly turned it upside down, emptying its contents. The four pieces of clothes were now lying on the concrete road as a result.

“Did you wash them?”

About a week ago.

“Excuse me, Suzumiya-san,”

Koizumi looked at my muddy PE uniform, like a desert mouse staring desperately at the Mongolian tiger that has been forced it into a dead-end corner, and said,

“So where do we get changed? Is there some hidden place nearby?”

“We can change here,”

Haruhi replied swiftly, and grabbed the trousers at once.

“There aren’t many people here, and it’s not that cold if you change quickly. Don’t worry, I’ll turn around. John, you turn around as well, we’ll cover for him,”

She glanced quickly at me. What’s that supposed to mean?

“I wouldn’t mind being watched,”

She smiled mischievously, then proceeded to put the trousers on under her skirt.

“I never knew you had such long legs.”

She knelt down to fold up the long trousers, after adjusting the length, she then stood up and unhooked her skirt.

The skirt simply slid down from her waist. She then took off her black blazer. As she begun to unbutton her blouse, I quickly turned aside.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m wearing a T-shirt inside anyway.”

The blouse fell on top of the blazer and skirt. I slowly turned my gaze back. Wearing a short-sleeved plain white T-shirt and a pair of sports trousers, Haruhi stood proudly while her long hair fluttered in the wind. As I stared at her like that, I suddenly had an urge to see a certain sight once again.

“Hey, do you want to tie a ponytail?”

Haruhi looked back at me,

“What for?”

No particular reason, just my preference really.

Haruhi snorted casually,

“Tying a ponytail may look easy, but tying a nice ponytail is easier said than done!”

Nevertheless, from her blazer on the ground, Haruhi took out a rubber band and elegantly tied her long dark hair behind her head.

“This isn’t so bad. Now I look more like I’m from the Athletics Club. So you think it’s OK?”

I think it’s marvelous. For me, her charm has increased by at least 36%.

“Jerk.”

Just as I was wondering how to react to this, I realized she was only pretending to be angry. I ought to have known better.

Though it took a while longer, even Koizumi had finished changing. It must’ve been tough on him to wear a short-sleeve T-shirt and shorts in such freezing weather. Not to mention he had to wear someone else’s clothes, so it must’ve felt extra peculiar. Shivering with goosebumps, Koizumi asked,

“Suzumiya-san, you’re not going to wear your jacket, right? Mind if I borrow it?”

Haruhi was also wearing short sleeves, yet she bore a smile that was enough to repel the cold and said,

“No can do. I need that jacket to conceal my bag. I’ve already come this far disguised like this, I’m not going to let one bag ruin it.”

Indeed, the schoolbags for Kouyouen School and North High were slightly different in their exterior design. Haruhi opened up the track suit jacket like a table cloth and wrapped it around her and Koizumi’s bags, and then ordered me to carry them. She then stuffed all her clothes and Koizumi’s into my sack, and asked me to carry that as well.

“Now then,”

Haruhi placed her arms on her hips and said,

“Now we look like we just came back from marathon practice. Not bad, huh?”

You’re not bad, of course, but what about me? Where could you find an Athletic Club member carrying a lot of stuff while going on marathon training in regular uniform all at the same time?

“Well, you could think of yourself as the manager of the Athletic Club! And now! One, two, fight! One, two, fight!”

As the ponytailed girl ran off, I exchanged glances with Koizumi. Then, we shrugged our shoulders at the same time as we followed her.

Both this Koizumi and I knew very well that it was tremendously difficult to stop Haruhi from running off, no matter what the circumstances. So besides chasing after her, there was nothing else we could do.

It’s always been like that, right?

I don’t know if it’s a good or bad thing, but unlike Kouyouen, the gates at North High are always open. Guards are nowhere to be found. Everything was going according to plan; Haruhi’s phony marathon run while shouting slogans came to an end quickly as we safely arrived at our destination, the entrance hall. I never thought it would be such a hassle just to bring Haruhi and Koizumi into my school; they were still entering and leaving this place regularly three days ago.

“Such an old complex! Why are the walls prefabricated? Are prefecture schools really that poor? I was right not to enroll here.”

I listened to her very correct statement while turning my gaze away from the rows of shoe lockers. I had already changed into my indoor shoes. Just when I was wondering whether there were any more slippers for guests, Haruhi had already casually opened the locker nearest to her and was holding some random student’s shoes.

It was just like Haruhi to do that. I instinctively made a strange smile.

“What are you smiling for? You sure look stupid. It’s not like I did anything funny.”

After she said that, I quickly took my smile off. She was right: no matter what laws Haruhi might break, now was not the time to be smiling.

I was thinking Taniguchi’s foot size was probably about the same as Koizumi’s, so I went and took Taniguchi’s shoes and gave them to him.

“Sorry about that.”

With a tone that didn't sound sorry at all, Koizumi thanked me politely and put on the shoes. I stuffed the sneakers that he was wearing into Taniguchi's locker.

I then took their bags, which were wrapped under the jacket, and carried them under my arm again.

"I'll lead the way, follow me."

"Hold it!"

As I was about to walk off, Haruhi stopped me. She unconsciously toyed with her ponytail with her fingers and said,

"That alien Nagato-san, she's in the Literature Club, right?

To be precise, the current Nagato is a normal high school girl who was formerly an alien. Regardless, I guess she's still waiting for me to come over right now.

"That Nagato-san probably wouldn't run away. Let's go get that time traveller Asahina-san. Where is she?"

She's probably gone home…… Suddenly a thought came to my mind. My instincts weren't just for show, I didn't even need to trace my memories. I can say confidently that this Asahina-san who doesn't know me was carrying some calligraphy tools with her. Before she got dragged into the SOS Brigade, she was a member of the Calligraphy Club. That means she's still at school right now.

"All right then, this way."

I'm sorry, Nagato. Please wait just a little longer. We have to go to the Calligraphy Club room before coming to look for you. Silently praying that the Calligraphy Club was in today, I naturally increased my speed.

The one who opened the door to the club room was Haruhi. That girl simply had no concept of the etiquette of knocking. I wasn't in the mood to lecture her on such minor details, while Koizumi stood uneasily at the corridor.

There were three girls in the Calligraphy Club room; it looked like they were practicing writing calligraphy for new year greetings.

"Which one of you here is Asahina-san?"

"……Can I help you?"

The smallest of the three girls widened her eyes and said in a timid voice through her cherry red lips.

“What is it……”

Asahina-san was sitting elegantly on the chair, holding her brush in mid-air.

I leaned past Haruhi’s shoulder and inspected the room. Tsuruya-san wasn’t here. I breathed a sigh of relief. I remembered that she wasn’t in the Calligraphy Club.

Haruhi whispered to my ear,

“It’s her, right? Is she really a second year student? She looks more like a junior high student.”

“I too thought she was a junior high student. But you’re right, she’s Asahina-san.”

After hearing that, Haruhi walked in huge strides and began to bullshit at this little angel, who had stiffened while holding her brush,

“I’m Suzumiya of the Student Council’s Information Division. Asahina-san, the reason I’ve come is because there’s something I need to ask you. Do you have a moment?”

You ought to script your lies better, especially when you’re dressed in a short-sleeve T-shirt and sports trousers!

Asahina-san blinked her eyes nonstop and said nervously,

“Student Council…… Information Division? What is that…… But I don’t know anything,”

“It doesn’t matter, just come with me!”

Haruhi snatched her brush and threw it by the side of the paper, then grabbed Asahina-san’s arm and forcefully pulled her up. The other club members were too stunned and frightened to be able to say anything. If Tsuruya-san were here, I might have been able to observe an interesting, out-of-this-world fight between her and Haruhi. Haruhi wrapped her arms around Asahina-san’s waist and simply abducted her without giving an explanation.

“Your breasts…… They’re huge. Hmm, you’re one of a kind. I like it!”

Haruhi said cheerfully as she groped the breasts of an upper classman from another school.

“Kyaa! Wah! Wh… Wha… Eh!?”

Noticing me standing by the door, Asahina-san’s eyes widened even further. She was probably thinking, It’s that pervert from the other day! Asahina-san looked fearfully as well at Koizumi,

who had to stand on one foot to keep warm as he was getting frozen while standing in the corridor. Koizumi looked at Asahina-san as though looking at a stranger and said,

“I’m not a bad person, honest.”

Stop trying to act as though you have nothing to do with it. Especially when you’re dressed like that, Koizumi. It won’t work.

Like a mother trying to stop her child from running away once being told she had to go see the dentist, Haruhi carried a struggling Asahina-san up and said,

“Hey, John, that leaves just Nagato-san. Hurry up and take me to her.”

I don’t need you to tell me that.

After all, I have to rush over to that place before some keen-eyed student or teacher who had discovered that I skipped classes finds me.

The place located on the third floor of the complex known as the Old Shack, the headquarters of the SOS Brigade, which is officially known as the club room for the Literature Club.

This time I knocked on the door before opening it.

“Hey, Nagato.”

The bespectacled girl lifted her gaze from the thick hardback library book on the table,

“Ah……”

Seeing it was me, Nagato breathed a sigh of relief,

“Eh?”

When she saw Haruhi following me in, her eyes widened,

“……Eh?”

Seeing Asahina-san being carried in by Haruhi, she opened her jaw,

“……”

When she saw Koizumi entered last, she was speechless.

“Hi there,”

Haruhi smiled brightly. After making sure everyone was in the room, she went and locked the door. Click! Upon hearing this sound, both Nagato and Asahina-san had the same reaction - their bodies stiffened up in fear.

"W… What are you doing?"

It was just like that day, Asahina-san was close to tears.

"W… Where is this place? Why did you bring me here? And, w… Why are you locking the door? What do you want with me?"

It was the exact same response, even I was moved to tears by this nostalgia.

"Shut up!"

Just like that day, Haruhi had the situation forcefully under control, she then inspected the whole room.

"So that four-eyed girl is Nagato-san? Hi there! I'm Suzumiya Haruhi! This one here in PE uniform is Koizumi-kun; while this little girl here with extraordinarily large breasts is Asahina-san. As for that guy, you should know him, right? He's John Smith!"

"John Smith…?"

Nagato looked stunned as she pushed the rims of her glasses and looked at me in disbelief. I shrugged my shoulders and accepted this stupid name. Both Kyon and John sounded stupid anyway.

"So… This is the SOS Brigade, huh? There's not a lot in here, but it's not a bad room. It's worth bringing some stuff over."

Like a curious cat being brought to a new residence, Haruhi wandered around the room, looked out of the window, examined the books on the bookshelf looking interested, and then she said to me,

"So, what do we do next?"

Don't tell me you didn't think of that before deciding to come over? Man, that was so like Haruhi's way of thinking.

"I'm for making this room as our headquarters, but it's so inconvenient to get here. It'll be a waste of time to come over here after school. I don't have any connections with anyone from North High. Oh yeah, why don't we just set a time and meet at the coffee shop in front of the station?"

After saying this, no one besides me and the girl who was talking knew what was going on.

Nagato looked like a doll with a troubled look; Asahina-san acted strangely as she trembled; while Koizumi began his miming act.

I've got to say something, however, before I was able to speak…

Ding!

Suddenly, the computer which no one touched made some electronic noises. Nagato turned her head instinctively.

"Huh?"

Asahina-san had to lift her hips in order to see what was going on. All my knowledge about how these machines work has been sucked away by this strange computer.

The ancient cathode ray tube screen made a static noise, and slowly illuminated - I only knew this from the reflection on Nagato's glasses.

This was supposed to be corresponded by the sound of the hard disk spinning, yet no sound could be heard. I've seen this happen before… No, I remember back then I had to turn the machine on first… The OS screen did not appear, instead the screen displayed an odd appearance that looked very familiar…

"Let me have a look,"

My body moved on its own. I pushed Haruhi aside and dashed to the front of the screen.

Silently displayed on the dark gray screen was a line of words.

YUKI.N > If you are reading this, I am probably no longer myself.

…Yes, that's it, Nagato…

"What's going on here? No one's typing anything, this is creepy!"

"Maybe it's been programmed to turn on at a certain time? But this computer sure looks old. It must've been a lot of work for such an old machine."

I could not listen to anything Haruhi and Koizumi said behind me. I didn't even dare to blink, for fear of missing a single word or sentence. I could hear my heart thumping in my ears as I stared at the screen.

YUKI.N > When this message appears, it means that you, me, Suzumiya Haruhi, Asahina Mikuru and Koizumi Itsuki have all been gathered here.

It was as if the words were moving to match my reading speed. Without any decorative description, the cursor then typed out the following words:

YUKI.N > This is the key. You have found the answer.

I didn't exactly find the answer. It was more like me stumbling into it while being forcefully dragged by Haruhi along with Koizumi. This Haruhi sure is quite useful… By the way, Nagato, it's been a while.

I watched the words on the screen feeling nostalgic. Though the lines were silent, inside my heart I could hear Nagato reading each word monotonously. The cursor continued to move:

YUKI.N > This is the Emergency Escape Program. To activate it, hit the "Enter" key, otherwise, hit any other key. Once activated, you will be given a chance to repair the space-time continuum. However, neither success nor your safe return can be guaranteed.

Emergency Escape……Program. That's it! It's in this computer!

YUKI.N > This program can only be executed once. Once it is executed, it will be deactivated. Should you choose not to activate it, it will also be deactivated. Are you ready?

This was the last line of words. The cursor at the end flickered non-stop.

Should I hit "Enter"? Or should I hit some other key?

When I came to my senses, I realized Haruhi was peeking over my shoulder.

"What does it all mean? Is it some secret organization? John, stop fooling around and explain already!"

I completely ignored Haruhi, Koizumi and Asahina-san. During this moment, my eyes were neither fixed on Haruhi in her ponytail, Koizumi in my PE uniform, nor the ever-so-cute Asahina-san. I had put all my attention onto this computer and the only other person in this room. I said to the bespectacled girl who was staring at the screen looking stunned:

"Nagato, do you have any recollection of this?"

"…No,"

“Are you sure?”

“Why do you ask?”

Why was she in such a hurry to deny any involvement? It was you who is typing those words……I had wanted to say that, but if I did, this Nagato would probably freak out.

I decided to examine the last part of the message once again.

This was a message Nagato left for me, it was the Nagato that I had always known that wrote it. To be honest, I didn’t really understand what this Emergency Escape Program meant, and the disclaimer about success not being completely guaranteed unsettled me.

Yet, I’ve come this far, there’s no point fretting about it. I used to place my entire trust on that Nagato, and I could only trust her again now. She rarely makes any mistakes. Besides trusting Nagato, the silent alien-created Living Humanoid Interface who has saved my life numerous times, who else could I trust? If I doubt even what she says, then I really need to doubt what my mind is thinking.

“Hey, John. What’s wrong? You look so strange.”

Haruhi’s voice sounded as if it came from a distance.

“Please leave me alone for a while. I’m trying to organize my thoughts.”

Right now, I really needed to think things over. A Haruhi and Koizumi who study in a different school, an Asahina-san who wasn’t a time traveler, and a Nagato who doesn’t seem to know anything. After thinking about these, I realized that these weren’t the things I should be worrying about now.

The words written by Nagato on the screen were her personal thoughts. The genuineness of that message cannot be doubted.

I stretched my arms and took a deep breath.

That’s it…

The only thing I was sure was that I wanted to get out of this world. I wanted to see the SOS Brigade once again, which I was so familiar with that it has become a part of my daily life, as well as everyone in that world. The Haruhi, Asahina-san, Koizumi and Nagato here weren’t the ones that I knew. There was no ‘Organization’ or Integrated Data Entity here, and the adult version of Asahina-san would never visit this world, since everything’s so messed up.

It didn’t take me long to make up my mind.

I took out a crumpled piece of paper from my jacket…

“I’m sorry, Nagato, but you can have it back.”

Nagato’s pale fingers slowly reached out to receive the blank club application form. Once I let go, the application form flickered about, though there was hardly any wind in here. After missing her grip once, she finally grabbed hold of it the second time around.

“This…”

Nagato’s voice was even shaking, her eyes concealed by her eyelashes.

“However,” I quickly explained, “To tell the truth, I was already a member of this room to begin with. There was no need for me to join the Literature Club, as for the reason…”

Haruhi, Koizumi and Asahina-san all looked and me and thought, What the hell is he talking about? Nagato’s expression was covered by her hair, so I couldn’t see properly. It doesn’t matter. Don’t worry, Nagato. No matter what happens next, I’ll definitely return to this room.

“As for the reason, that’s because I’m a member of the SOS Brigade.”

Are you ready?

You bet.

I stretched out my finger and hit the “Enter” key.

In the next moment……

“Whoa!?”

When I stood up, I was hit by a very intense dizziness. I involuntarily grabbed hold of the desk as my vision spun before me. I could feel my ears buzzing as I heard the sounds of people talking coming from afar. Everything went black. I lost all sense of balance, I felt as though I was drifting around, just like a tree leaf that had fallen into a rapid, spinning forever non-stop. The voices calling me started to drift away, what were they trying to say? Was it John or Kyon? I wasn’t sure myself, it didn’t sound like it’s from Haruhi. It’s so dark, am I falling? Where was I falling to? Someone should at least tell me.

My thoughts were in complete chaos. Were my eyes really open? I couldn’t see anything, nor could I hear anything. I could only feel myself floating. Just where was my body? What about Haruhi? Everything’s gone twisted. Koizumi, Asahina-san, where am I? Just where was I going? Just what awaits me in this Emergency Escape Program?

Nagato……

“Whoa!?”

I yelled once again, my ankles were nearly cracked as I barely managed to support myself. It was only then I realized I was still standing.

“What the hell…?”

It was dark everywhere, though not dark enough where you couldn’t see your own fingers. I was relieved I could still see.

“Where am I…”

Looking out at the dim lights shining into the window, I confirmed my position. This looks like a room, and I seem to be holding on to a table. On top of the table was an old computer…

“The Literature Club room!”

It was the Literature Club room from before.

Yet Nagato wasn’t here. Haruhi, Asahina-san and Koizumi had also vanished. Only I remained. The sun seems to have set already, even though sunlight was still shining through the window a while ago. It’s gone dark rather a bit too quick. I looked through the window and into the sparsely populated night skies, seeing the few stars glittering. Time sure flies by quickly.

The room was the same as before. There was a bookshelf, a long table, and an old computer. I understood at once just by seeing these. I didn’t return to my original world, since there wasn’t any stuff from the SOS Brigade. The Commander’s Desk wasn’t here, neither was Asahina-san’s cosplay wardrobe. It was still an empty Literature Club room …but…

The sweat on my forehead dripped into my eyes. I promptly wiped them off with the sleeves of my jacket.

Something’s not right.

Just what was this disorienting feeling? I already knew where I was. This was indeed the Literature Club room. Are you a taiko drum? I suddenly remembered the pun Taniguchi made earlier, but that’s not the problem. Yes, the problem wasn’t about where this place was.

“This is…”

Suddenly, I discovered the truth of why I was feeling so disoriented! At the same time, my body temperature felt as though it has risen sharply, but that wasn’t quite accurate. The truth was that

the surrounding temperature was already high, hence my body temperature had risen as well, so it wasn't an illusion.

I couldn't take it anymore, and took off my jacket. All the pores in my body opened up at once and sweated. I then took off my sweater and rolled up the sleeves of my shirt, yet the heat accumulated inside the room barely dispersed.

"This is too hot!"

I began to grumble.

"It's feels as hot as…"

A hot summer's night.

In that case, there was only one question I should be asking right now,

What season is it right now?

Chapter 4

I believe anyone who has experienced it would know how scary it is to walk alone at school in the dark.

I hung my jacket over my shoulder and walked slowly out of the club room. Like a ninja, I tried not to make any sound when walking down the stairs. Every time I reached a corner, I would always take a look around me before moving any further. It sure was exhausting! I had no idea what date it was in this North High, but it'd be troublesome if I was seen by an on-duty teacher. I wouldn't even know how to explain this—in fact, I wish someone would explain all this to me instead!

I walked sweatily under the humid air and finally reached the entrance hall.

"Now, what do we have here…"

After saying that, I opened my shoe locker. Inside were someone else's indoor shoes—I was pretty sure they weren't mine. I quickly eliminated the possibility of someone opening the wrong locker and taking my shoes by mistake. It was the middle of summer right now, that means I've once again leaped into another dimension — I'm quite amazed I could have such an imagination. The current owner of this shoe locker wasn't me, but someone from this world or dimension. I wasn't as surprised as I expected myself to be, either because I was already used to this stuff, or because I was already numb to such overwhelming events.

"Can't be helped."

Obviously it wouldn't look nice to be wearing indoor shoes outside, but I was left with no other choice. My priority was to leave the school complex. As expected, the entrance door was locked tight at night. So I walked to a nearby window, unlocked it and opened it carefully. I slowly inhaled the fragrant night breeze and leaped out the window and onto the stony steps, where Haruhi had awoken me when we had been inside the Sealed Dimension.

I stopped for about ten seconds. After making sure no one could see me, I continued onward.

It was just as hot outside the school complex. This was a typical, humid Japanese summer heat. I just came over from the freezing cold winter, so all my sweat glands were now opening up like mad. I wiped the sweat off my face with my long sleeved shirt and headed towards the gate.

It was easy once I was outside. I must thank the school's non-existent security—I only needed to climb over the fence and that was it. After climbing over, I picked up my jacket which I had thrown across beforehand, and looked up at the starry sky as I pondered my next move.

Right now, I need to know what date and what time it is now. After all, there was a huge time difference between the past and the future.

Might as well walk down the hill first. There should be a convenience store along the way. If I walked into a nearby residence and asked, “What year and month is it today?” I’d probably be treated as a demented high school student and locked up by the authorities. Better to go somewhere where I could find out the date without having to ask someone.

“Still, it’s quite hot…”

I was already hot as I was wearing my winter uniform, but now even my trousers were glued to my legs by all the sweat. At that moment, I truly hated the inventor of these synthetic fibers. Not to mention this winter uniform doesn’t even keep one warm in winter; it’s only designed to look nice.

The fact that I was mumbling about such stuff meant that my brain was beginning to function properly again. Instead of freezing in the winter waiting for spring to arrive, I’d rather be complaining about how hot summer was while waving a fan. Besides, I’ve had too many memories of my first summer in high school, though they were all physically and mentally exhausting, yet once I got them over with, they weren’t so bad at all. At least I got to see Asahina-san in a swimsuit. I don’t think we’ve had any SOS Brigade style activities in winter so far.

My mind was occupied with the taste of the hot pot I was missing as I walked down the slope. After fifteen minutes, I finally saw an illuminated sign. It was a convenience store which I occasionally go to so I can grab a bite on my way home. At least I knew another thing, the current time was before the store closes for the day.

I couldn’t wait for the automatic doors to open, and looked around the wall once I got inside. It took some time for me to get used to the coolness of the air conditioning. During this time, I looked heartily at the analogue clock hanging on the wall.

Eight thirty.

As the sun had already set, it should be eight thirty at night.

What about the date? What year was it? There were all kinds of newspapers on the rack. Any one would do. I randomly picked up a sports daily in the front and browsed very quickly at the contents. It doesn’t matter what was being written; even if it were the wildest imaginations cooked up by some third-rate tabloid, they wouldn’t go so far as to fake the date at the top of the page, as well, would they?

My gaze stopped on a certain spot, and I saw it.

A set of numbers, which some people would consider lucky, entered my vision.

What year was it? As though I was trying to swallow the paper, I carefully confirmed the year that was printed on top. The store assistant took a quick glance at me looking annoyed, but I couldn’t care less about that now.

I stared at the four digit number again and again. If I subtracted the year I had arrived from—where I was still having a cold December—from the year on this sports daily… Even a kid would know the answer to such a simple math question.

"So that's how it is, Nagato…"

I lifted my head from the newspaper and sighed deeply as I looked at the ceiling.

The joyously romantic Tanabata festival.

Today was the 7th of July of three years ago.

Tanabata, three years ago… Just what happened on this day?

The Tanabata of "this year" was like a rhapsody; after writing our wishes and hanging them out on a bamboo stick, I had accepted Asahina-san's invitation and traveled back in time to this day. Afterwards, I met the adult version of Asahina-san, who urged me to go to East Junior High that night. And so, I came across a seventh-grade Haruhi about to climb over the fence and was dragged along to help her write a message to outer space on the school's track field with white chalk.

Thereafter, I brought Asahina-san (small), who lost her time-traveling device called a TPDD, to Nagato's high-class apartment, and there the two of us slept for three years, allowing us to return to where we came from…

"That means…"

This was easier than a simple math problem. All I needed to do was trace back what I had done that day. That's it, I've finally got the gist of it, the essential step needed to restore the twisted world back to order.

It has to be like that, right?

My legs were trembling hard, not from fear but rather the thrilling sensation from realizing that something very important needs to be done.

Three years ago. Tanabata. East Junior High. The mysterious signs. John Smith.

As all the seemingly unrelated pieces begin to add up, I finally came to a conclusion. It was a simple yet clear conclusion, I spoke the same line once again,

"That means…"

“They” are “here”.

The seductively charming Asahina-san (big) and the Nagato Yuki in standby mode.

The two helpful people who could assist me were right here in this time period.

I threw down the newspaper and bolted out of the convenience store, thinking as I ran along.

I remember that the first time when I came to three years ago, which was right now, Asahina-san had woken me up on a bench in the park near Kouyouen Station and told me “It’s about nine at night.” If I were to run for about half an hour, I should be able to reach there in time. The only problem was whether the culprit had also made changes to this time period. If there were changes, then I would not find my other self there. In any case, I’ve got to make contact with Asahina-san (big) or Nagato in her luxury apartment, or I could meet both. That means there were two places I should go, the question was where to go first.

Nagato would be in her apartment all the time, so I could see her anytime, but I would only find Asahina-san (big) in that specific time and place.

Dressed as a teacher, this adult Asahina-san was the one who had given me a hint concerning Snow White and quickly left, hailing from an even farther future than the Asahina-san I knew. The image of her pinching her younger self’s face and smiling cheerfully was still fresh in my memory.

That Asahina-san must know who I am, there should be no doubt about that.

Though the park wasn’t far from the station, there were hardly any people there. Maybe it’s because it’s very late now; this is an ideal time for all types of suspicious characters to come out. Is this the holy land for freaks I wonder… I was thinking the same thing when I first came here during the last Tanabata visit.

I didn’t feel like making a grand entrance, so I had to walk alongside the brick wall of the park in the dark. Though it’s called a wall, it was only as tall as my waist, while on top of it was a large wire fence, and surrounding it were all sorts of bushes. It was extremely easy to hide without being seen by anyone inside the park in the daytime, let alone at night, though I’ll need to be careful of any pedestrians outside giving me weird gazes behind my back.

I recalled the position of the bench where I had woken up that time and slowly moved along the wall to find an ideal hiding spot.

It was nearly nine at night.

I guess what I'm doing can be called voyeurism. After sticking my neck out from within the bushes, I finally saw what I wanted to see.

"…That's the one."

It feels like watching myself starring in a movie. It also feels like watching myself from a third-person's perspective in a dreamscape.

"But how am I gonna explain this…"

The bench appeared under the illumination of the lamps, as though being showered by the bright light. Though it was a bit far, I couldn't be mistaken, the two people on top were both wearing North High uniforms. It was as I remembered.

My past self and Asahina-san were sitting right there.

That other "me" was lying horizontally, resting his head on Asahina-san's lap while sleeping. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't dreaming of anything worth drooling over. If a person couldn't get sweet dreams using the world's most precious pillow, then there's no way he could ever sleep in peace.

Being used as a pillow, Asahina-san would occasionally take a look at me sleeping on her lap, or blow softly into my ear, or toy around with it. Man, I was feeling jealous already… No, wait, why was I feeling jealous over myself, anyway?

For a moment, I really felt like shoving off that other "me" and taking his place, but in the end I decided to suppress that impulse. The "me" in this time did not see my other self then. If I rushed out now, things would just get complicated… right? The space-time continuum was already messed up as it is; the last thing I want is to mess it up further myself.

Withholding my body's irrational impulsiveness, I continued my role as a Peeping Tom. The more I thought about it, the more pleased I was with myself for managing to keep my composure at such an odd time.

It was under such thoughts that I continued my observation. Asahina-san moved her cherry-red lips and said something; sleeping on her lap, "I" moved slightly and then slowly woke up. I couldn't hear anything from where I was hiding, but I remembered clearly that Asahina-san said, "Oh, you've awakened?"

After conversing for a while with Asahina-san, she then felt tired and rested her head on "my" shoulder…

The bush behind the bench ruffled, and that person appeared.

Wearing a white long-sleeved blouse and a blue mini-skirt, there's no way I could ever forget that teacher's outfit.

Just before the end of May, she wrote me a note asking to meet me, and then gave me the hint about Snow White. She even told me about her star-shaped birthmark, as well. And then on this day, that is on Tanabata, she made Asahina-san (small) fall asleep, then guided me to where Haruhi was before disappearing…

The adult version of Asahina-san.

Her height and body had both grown for a couple of years, coming from an even farther future than Asahina-san the time traveler, this was none other than Asahina-san (big).

It was just like that time.

It's true, I was there myself on Tanabata three years ago, yet what was happening was exactly the same as I had remembered.

After speaking to "me" for a while, Asahina-san (big) knelt down to pinch Asahina-san's (small) face and caressed her body, she then stood up to say something to "me" again.

It was her mission to bring you here, yet from here onwards, it would be my mission to guide you.

Um… Just what is…

I think that's what was being said.

After explaining everything to a wide-jawed "me", Asahina-san (big) then walked away and disappeared from the illumination of the street lamp. It was now that I noticed that she was heading towards the exit that was opposite to the one leading to East Junior High.

"I" remained awestruck, staring at the sleeping Asahina-san (small) and thinking about something. I wanted to recall what it was that "I" had been thinking of, but I abandoned trying to walk down Memory Lane after a few seconds, as I didn't want to lose track of Asahina-san (big).

I dashed out from the bushes where I was hiding and walked quickly along the edge of the park. There was no longer any need to hide my presence, as when I was "me", "I" did not notice me. At that time, "my" attention was not fixed on me who came from another time period, neither did "I" realize there was another me in this time period. This made sense, as the "me" in the past could never have realized how messed up the time-space continuum in my time period would become. There was no time to pay any more attention to "me", who was too busy carrying Asahina-san on his back to be worried about other things. I decided to walk away.

After passing the next corner I saw her at about a hundred meters away. She was walking with her back towards me. The tapping sounds made by her high-heeled shoes sounded melodic. She didn't seem to be in a hurry—suits me as I was in a hurry to see her. If I lose her now, then I really won't know why I went through all the trouble to come here.

Walking a bit faster, I shortened my distance to her. Under the dim lights at night, her long limbs and flowing hair seemed to glimmer in the light. Though I could only see her back, I was sure it was her.

It didn't take me long to catch up and call out to her,

"Asahina-san!"

She stopped. The soft sound of her high-heeled shoes tapping on the ground ended. The soft brown hair on her back wavered. As if in slow motion, she gradually turned around.

I wondered what she was going to say.

Huh? Didn't we just say goodbye a while ago?

Did you follow me all the way here? You couldn't have.

Hey, where's my other self?

In the end, it was none of the above.

"Good evening, Kyon-kun."

With a beautiful face that was just as I had remembered, she greeted me with a beaming smile.

"It's been a while. For 'you', that is."

The adult Asahina-san winked after saying that. It was indeed the smile that I last saw five months ago.

With the expression of a relieved child, Asahina-san (big) said,

"Thank goodness, we get to meet here again. Actually I was a bit worried whether I had made any mistakes,"

"I'm still pretty clumsy," Asahina-san said and then cutely stuck out her tongue. It was such a charming move that was enough to soften the bones inside one's body. But if I were to melt into a pile of dirt right now, then I'll lose everything.

This Asahina-san knew what I was about to do next.

Trying my best to control my tongue, which seemed to have a mind of its own, I spoke,

“Asahina-san, so you knew I’d come here…… You knew I’d return to this time, and in this place, right?”

“Yes,” Asahina-san nodded her head, “Because this is a predetermined fact,”

“On that day of Tanabata, the little Asahina-san would bring me to the Tanabata three years ago…… Which is today. You must be the one who had arranged for her to bring me here, right?”

“Yes, that is a prerequisite. Otherwise, you would not be here now,”

If I hadn’t gone to East Junior High and drawn those graffiti, I wouldn’t have told the seventh-grade Haruhi now that my name was “John Smith”. Of course, that would mean that the Haruhi studying in her first year in Kouyouen School would never have heard of that name. In other words, I would not have found the link. Because besides that name, there would be no link whatsoever with me and that Haruhi who I was just with a few hours ago. As a result, the five of us would not be gathered in the club room, and the Escape Program would not be activated.

At this time, a question arose in my head. That other John Smith…… Could it be!?

“That would be you, Kyon-kun. The current you,”

Asahina-san (big) gave me a smile as pretty as a white rose,

“It’s a bit tiring talking while standing up, let’s find somewhere to sit down. We still have time,”

The power in her smile and words was enough to dispel all the anxiety and confusion within me.

If Asahina-san (big) was here, that means the future still exists. Not the chaotic future after December 18th, but the future where I and the Haruhi and Asahina-san I knew came from.

There’s got to be a way.

I’ve obtained a sense of confidence that made me feel relieved. As if to further boost that confidence, she continued,

“From now on, guiding you will be my mission. But after that, you’re on your own. I will only follow your lead then,”

She then gave me a wink that was enough to cause my knees to go soft.

We returned to the park and sat on the bench where Asahina-san (small) and “I” were sitting a while ago. Before sitting down, Asahina-san (big) looked as though she were touching an ancestral relic as she softly caressed the bench. I gradually sat down looking serious as well. The

bench was still warm, it was the body warmth of myself and Asahina-san who five months ago had traveled back three years ago in time.

I asked quickly,

“Did something happen to the flow of time? I knew that the time period where I came from is linked to this Tanabata. If that wasn’t the case, I wouldn’t have arrived here. Then, Asahina-san…… Does that mean there’s no connection between the future you’re from and the altered future I came from?”

“I can’t tell you the details,”

I thought so, must be one of those classified information, huh?

“No,”

Asahina-san (big) shook her head,

“I cannot explain it in a way you would comprehend. Our STC Theory is built on specific concepts. It’s too difficult to convey it in speech for you to understand. Do you still remember the time when I first told you my true identity?”

I sure do, sitting by the river bank with the cherry blossom petals falling, I heard Asahina-san, who I always thought to be just a cute upperclassman, reveal the shocking truth about her being a time traveler.

“At that time, didn’t I say something that you could hardly understand? That’s the point. If I had explained, I would just make you even more confused,”

Asahina-san (big) softly hit the side of her head as though knocking on it while winking at the same time. Every little thing she does is just so sexy.

“This is a concept that cannot be explained in speech, it can only be conveyed in ways other than that. Do you understand?”

Nope. As though trying to teach a kindergarten kid calculus, Asahina continued to explain to me, who was already feeling dizzy,

“Um, but, soon you will understand. You will. That’s all I can tell you now,”

Soon you will understand. Where have I heard of that before? That’s it, it was Nagato. Nagato had told me the same thing before…… No, hang on.

A flash of inspiration was triggered by the synapses in my brain as I gave the following reaction,

“Before summer vacation…… The one Nagato mentioned in the giant cave cricket incident…… About how computers in the future aren’t like what they are now, could it be……”

“Wow, that’s impressive. You still remember that? You’re right, the equivalent to computers or the so-called Internet in this time period, um…… It does not exist in a material sense in our time period, but rather it exists in a shapeless sense within our brains. The TPDD is also the same,”

The object that wasn’t supposed to disappear but has gone missing.

“Is that a time-traveling device?”

“It’s a Time Plane Destruction Device,”

Isn’t that supposed to be classified information!?

“Well, it was classified for me back then. But for me, the rules have been relaxed a lot. The fact that I could come here means I’ve been working very hard,”

Asahina-san proudly puffed up her chest, the buttons on her blouse were close to popping out. A physically impossible body proportion was revealed before my eyes, normally I would be dazed by such a sight, but sadly, I wasn’t in the mood to satiate the appetite of my eyes with such scenery. I continued to ask,

“What’s the cause of it? I knew the future I’m from had changed, but when did it start to change?”

“For more details you should try asking Nagato-san in this time period. I can only tell you one thing: the change in the time plane where you came from occurred three years from ‘now’, on the morning of December 18th,”

For me, that would be two days ago. So it’s the time plane that’s changed? In that case…… Once again I tried to recall the two possibilities that Koizumi suggested. Turns out the non-alternate world theory was the correct one.

“That’s correct. Overnight, the STC files…… I mean, the whole world has changed. Only your memories remained intact. It was a massive time-quake that could be detected even in the distant future,”

It’s not like I wasn’t interested in what the STC or time-quake were, it’s just that I didn’t have time to delve into these irrelevant things, as I had more pressing questions to ask,

“Asahina-san, is it because you needed to resolve this huge change in the future that even I got involved in that you were waiting here?”

“It can’t be done by myself alone,” her face began to darken, “I would need the assistance of Nagato-san. Of course, it can’t be done without Kyon-kun as well,”

“Who is the culprit? I can only think of Haruhi doing this,”

“No,”

Asahina-san retracted her smile and said seriously,

“It wasn’t Suzumiya-san. The culprit is someone else,”

“Is it some new unknown person? Like some out-of-world slider that I’ve not met or something like that……”

“No,”

Interrupting me, Asahina-san looked worried for some reason as she said,

“It’s someone you know very well.”

After looking at her watch, Asahina-san (big) said there’s still time and began to think nostalgically of her memories with the SOS Brigade. For me, all those memories had taken place this year, yet for her it was many years ago. Being dragged by Haruhi into the club room, forced to dress up as a bunny girl, making wishes in Tanabata, encountering a murder mystery on a lone island, wearing yukatas in the O-bon festival, the whole brigade gathering together to work on our summer vacation homework, the various things that happened while shooting the movie on location…… As my memories were slowly being rekindled, Asahina-san’s (big) voice became slower and slower.

I was looking forward to hearing what my future would be like, and was waiting for her mouth to skip. Yet Asahina-san was extremely cautious about that, and kept the topic limited to the usual chit-chat.

“It may have been rough, but those memories were great.”

After making her concluding statement, Asahina-san kept quiet and gazed at me silently.

I was thinking about what to comment on as something soft yet warm landed on my shoulder. It was Asahina-san’s head. What was the meaning behind this action of hers? The weight of her body leaning against me was worth it’s weight in gold - the fragrance and weight stimulated my nerves and triggered all sorts of wild thoughts in my brain, I just couldn’t think properly at all. What was she trying to convey with that aroma from the cloth of her blouse? Was she trying to feel something from me? Closing her eyes and leaning her face on my shoulder, Asahina-san (big) didn’t say anything, yet I could feel her cherry-red lips moving. She seems to be whispering about something, just what was it?

Could it be…… I began to drift into fantasy again. Could this Asahina-san fall asleep as well, only to have another Asahina-san appear and tell me something enigmatic as well? And so I remain here forever as I meet numerous Asahina-sans from different time periods…… Damn it, my thoughts were becoming as mixed as the laundry in a washing machine, going around in the same circles. Just what was I thinking!? Can someone please bother telling me!?

Asahina-san (big) leaned on me for about another minute or so.

"Hee hee."

As if she could read my thoughts, she smiled and said,

"It's almost time. Let's go."

She stood up as though nothing had happened, though it was a pity, I had no choice but to return to my senses. She's right, it's time to go. Um…… Where're we going anyway?

The second destination.

The time was ten at night on Asahina-san's watch, that was the time after "I" had completed my role as an accomplice to Haruhi the seventh grader and finished drawing the graffiti on the track field of East Junior High. It was the time when "I" held the hand of a sobbing Asahina-san as we entered Nagato's apartment. It was at this time when time became frozen for "me".

Time to pay Nagato another visit.

"Before that,"

Asahina-san gave a heart-thumping and glittering smile and said,

"Isn't there something else you need to do first?"

After walking a short distance from the park, I came to a residential area.

Following Asahina-san's directions, I turned into an alley.

Ahead in the dark path was a tiny figure dashing like the wind. With a tiny pair of arms and legs sticking out from the short-sleeved T-shirt and shorts, she moved further and further away as her hair flowed.

"Hey!"

The tiny figure in a T-shirt and shorts slowly turned her head. After making sure she had noticed me, I cupped my mouth with my hands and shouted without holding back,

“Please take good care of the John Smith who would shake the world!”

After having a quick look at me, the seventh grader turned around looking pissed for some reason and marched forward.

She was probably thinking she’ll be able to find me anyway if she went to North High, so she turned without hesitation. Looking at that semi-long dark hair, I quietly added,

“Please remember it, Haruhi. You have to remember the name John Smith……”

I prayed with the bottom of my heart to the 12-year-old Haruhi, who would probably continue to be mischievous in East Junior High for some time to come.

Please don’t forget that I was here.

I knew the road to the high class apartment like the back of my hand, so I could practically walk there with my eyes closed. Walking just ahead of Asahina-san (big), I lifted my head to look at the building which I had just visited about twenty hours ago. Though we were still outside, Asahina-san (big) had already hidden her nice figure and stood behind me.

“……Kyon-kun, I have a favor.”

Seeing as how she was basically begging me, there was no reason for me to turn her down. No matter which time period Asahina-san is from, I’m not weird enough to turn down her request.

“I’m sorry, but even now I still feel uneasy when I’m with Nagato-san……”

That reminds me, Asahina-san (small) was like that every time she was in the club room, it was the same the last time she came here. Besides Haruhi, the only other person to keep his composure when in the presence of an alien or time traveler was Koizumi.

“That’s fine, I understand,”

I said gently as I entered the number 708 on the keypad next to the entrance, I then pushed the bell button.

A few seconds later, the intercom gave a knocking sound, indicating someone was listening on the other end.

Silence was greeted by silence and returned to my ear.

“Nagato, it’s me.”

Silence.

“Sorry about this, I don’t know how to explain it myself. In any case, I’m back from the future. Asahina-san is with me as well, the adult version that is. Oh, that’s Differential Temporal Variant for you.”

Silence.

“I need your help. After all, the one who threw me into this time period was you.”

Silence.

“Both Asahina-san and I should be in your apartment, right? Sleeping in that time frozen guest room……”

Beep. The lock to the gate opened.

“Come in.”

The voice of Nagato coming through the intercom felt so soothing. It was as calm as usual, without any exclamation or depression, though she sounded as though she was surprised, but maybe that’s just me. There’s nothing Nagato couldn’t do. Even in this situation she’s sure to find a way out, otherwise I’m finished.

As if walking into a fortress in her high-heeled shoes, Asahina-san grabbed hold of my belt with her finger, looking extremely nervous. After opening its door, the elevator began to take us up vertically once we were inside.

Finally, we have come before the familiar door of Room 708.

There was a doorbell, but it wasn’t working yet, so I knocked silently on the door. I could not sense anyone standing behind the door, yet the metallic door still opened.

“……”

The bespectacled face looked through the gap towards me, she then moved her gaze over onto Asahina-san (big) before moving it back onto me.

“……”

Being expressionless and silent at the same time, she was so devoid of any emotion that I really wanted someone to beg her to say something. This was Nagato indeed, the Nagato Yuki that I first knew. The original Nagato during the beginning of the school term in spring, as well as the one which “I” had asked help from “three years ago.”

“May we come in?”

After a thoughtful silence, Nagato nodded her head for about a centimeter or so, then turned towards her apartment. I guess I'll take that as a "yes." I said to the beautiful woman standing right behind me looking anxious,

"Let's go, Asahina-san,"

"Er…… You're right, it'll be fine,"

Sounds as though she was saying it for herself.

By the way, how many times have I visited this place already? According to my biological clock, this would be my fourth time, but chronologically, this was only my second time here. I've already been so confused by the order of time that I was impressed that my biological clock didn't malfunction. Leaping from winter to summer and coming back to three years ago twice, it would have been normal if something wrong had happened to me, yet right now I'm feeling fine. Not to mention my thoughts are the clearest they've been since I was born. Maybe I've gotten so used to all these surreal experiences that I've taken it for granted. If it was someone else, his mind would have short-circuited already.

When I look at it once again, Nagato's lifeless apartment was as cold as I had remembered it. It was no different from the "three years ago" which we went to back in May.

What was reassuring was that this Nagato was still the Nagato I knew. She was still expressionless and emotionless, she wouldn't panic if something were to happen, the ever reliable alien.

I took off my shoes and walked through the narrow corridor before coming to the living room. Nagato was there waiting. She stood there all alone, staring silently at me and Asahina-san. Even if she was surprised at our visit, I could not tell it from her face. Maybe she was already getting used to me coming to visit her from the future, though I didn't want to keep coming back to this day again and again myself.

"I guess we can skip the introductions,"

Nagato didn't sit down, so Asahina-san and I remained standing,

"This is the adult version of Asahina-san, I believe you've met each other before," Just as I said that, I remembered that that was actually three years later, "Sorry, you will meet each other. Anyway, this here is also Asahina-san, so try not to think too much about it."

Nagato looked at Asahina-san (big) with the eyes of an examiner during the national exam paper for mathematics. She then looked around the living room before finally fixing her gaze on the sexy figure behind me once again and said,

"Understood."

She nodded lightly, her hair hardly even flickered.

As I was following Nagato's gaze, I noticed that place - the special room adjacent to the living room, separated with a paper door.

"Can that be opened?"

Nagato shook her head towards the room that I was pointing at and said,

"Negative. The entire structural composition of that room has been frozen in time."

I felt a sense of both pity and relief at hearing that.

A warm breath was felt on my neck, it was Asahina-san (big) sighing in relief. She was thinking the same as I was, it seems. If she had seen herself sleeping cozily with me in the same futon/room, what would Asahina-san (big) have thought? I'd really like to ask, but right now it was more important to explain what was going on.

"Nagato, I'm really sorry for having to keep visiting you so suddenly. Anyway, can you please hear our story?"

How much had the "me" in the adjacent room told her already? The history of the SOS Brigade up to Tanabata, was it? Then I'll just have to continue from there and tell her what happened in the second half of the year, from the melancholic spring, where I had to put up with Haruhi's boredom, to the incessant sighs I made while making her movie. Of course, you were there as well, Nagato. You had always come to the rescue. After all these, the world suddenly changed when I woke up the day before yesterday. I wanted to know why everyone has lost those memories of what happened, which was why I came here with the help of the Emergency Escape Program which Nagato had provided.

It's going to take some time if I go into details, so once again I recited the condensed version which I told Haruhi. I skipped the minor details and only mentioned the important context of the story. For this girl, that was more than enough.

"……And that's how it was. So here I am once again, thanks to you."

As evidence was more important than a mere testimony, I took out the crumpled up bookmark from the pocket of my jacket. Like handing a spell-charm to a phantom, I handed the bookmark over to Nagato.

"……"

Nagato took the bookmark with her finger tips. She looked past the flowery patterns on the bookmark and studied the text that was printed on the back like an archaeologist who had just dug out an LCD television from a Cretaceous-era bedrock. It seems as though she was going to take forever to study those words, so I interrupted her examination,

“What should I do now?”

“I, I wish to restore this temporal anomaly,”

Asahina-san’s (big) voice sounded so nervous as though she was about to confess her love to the man of her dreams. Whenever she’s with Nagato, Asahina-san still remained as jittery as usual after all these years. That’s what I thought, anyway.

“Nagato-san…… Can you please assist us? You’re the only person who could restore the altered time plane to its original state. I beg you……”

Asahina-san (big) put her palms together and closed her eyes as though worshiping a deity. Oh Great Goddess Nagato, I too am praying for you to show mercy upon us. Please let me return to the club room where I could see Asahina-san and enjoy the tea that she brews, play board games with Koizumi, see you sitting like a statue and reading, while Haruhi would always barge into the room. That’s all I wish for.

“……”

Nagato lifted her gaze from the bookmark, and looked straight into the skies. I could understand why Asahina-san would look so nervous, since there was no chance of winning if she’s from a different faction than Nagato. I mean who in this world could fight even with Nagato? Only Haruhi perhaps?

The perfect acoustics of this high-class apartment meant that there was no echo made. It was so quiet that it seemed as though time had stopped. Nagato and I exchanged gazes, and I saw her nod a few millimeters.

“Let me confirm.”

Nagato said. As I was about to ask what she was going to confirm, she closed her eyes.

“……”

Very soon she reopened her eyes and looked at me with her obsidian black eyes,

“Unable to synchronize.”

She said quickly, and then stared at me. Her expression has changed a bit, and this time it wasn’t me imagining things. This was the expression she had between spring and summer, even Koizumi has noticed this change. Ever since she met us, Nagato’s expression has gradually changed, though it wasn’t the Nagato by winter time.

Her pale red lips moved again,

“I am unable to gain access to my temporal variant of that time period, because she has set up a protective barrier which selectively blocks my attempts to access.”

Though I didn’t understand what that meant, I felt uncomfortable with it. Does that mean there’s nothing you can do?

Nagato disregarded my fears and continued,

“However, I have an idea of the whole situation. It is possible to undergo restoration.”

Nagato softly caressed the words on the bookmark. After that, she began to explain with a voice that begins to accumulate words like a snowball,

“The temporal converter has made full use of Suzumiya Haruhi’s ability to create data and altered part of the world’s data.”

Her familiar calm voice sounded as serene as a music box I had heard when I was a baby and had soothed my heart.

“Therefore, the altered Suzumiya Haruhi does not possess the power to create data. In that dimension, the Integrated Data Sentient Entity is non-existent as well.”

I couldn’t quite understand, but it sure sounds very serious. Turns out besides myself, everyone, including Haruhi, has been given a new set of memories; a girls school became a co-ed, part of the students in North High were moved over to that other school, while all their memories have been secretly altered; the agent from the ‘Organization’, Nagato the alien, and Asahina-san the time traveler now all lived different lives; not to mention Asakura has returned while everyone in North High has no memory of Haruhi at all. Now it seems even Nagato’s boss has been erased.

What a mess.

“Using the powers stolen from Suzumiya Haruhi, the temporal converter was able to alter data concerning past memories in the range of 365 days.”

In other words, everyone’s memories from last December - from the time where I came from, that is - to December 17th this year has been altered completely. Yet for memories concerning Tanabata three years ago - which is now - there was nothing the culprit could do about that. It was thanks to Haruhi being able to remember about what happened in Tanabata that I was able to come here. Just who’s the dummy out there doing the same idiotic stuff that Haruhi would do?

Nagato’s gaze continues to be fixed on me,

“To restore the world to its original state, one must travel from here to December 18th three years from now, and activate the Restoration Program just after the temporal converter has executed the alteration.”

So, we'll be traveling to three years in the future next, right? The one who'll be doing the restoration would be you, right?

"I cannot go."

Why not?

When Nagato pointed to the guest room, I understood at once.

"I cannot leave them alone."

According to Nagato's explanation, in order to allow the time where my other self and Asahina-san were sleeping to remain frozen, she cannot perform any time travel herself. She then said in a voice as though reporting the time,

"Activate Emergency Mode."

"What does that mean?" I was getting a bit anxious.

"Harmonization."

I still don't get it.

Nagato slowly took off her glasses and wrapped them with her hands. As if being hung by an unseen thread, the glasses in her palms began to float. If I saw a normal person doing this, I would have thought there were some invisible strings attached to that person's fingers. Of course, Nagato wouldn't do something so normal.

Distortion.

The frame and glass both began to twist and form into a strange whirlpool shape, in an instant the pair of glasses has turned into another object. I've seen this shape before, it was a shape that would strike fear into the hearts of any human being.

I hesitantly gave my comment,

"It looks like a very huge syringe."

"That is correct."

A colorless liquid was filled up inside the syringe. Just who was going to get jabbed by that thing?

"This is the Restoration Program used to inject into the temporal converter's body."

Looking at the sharp needle sticking out from the end of the syringe, I instinctively turned away.

“Um…… Isn’t there a more reliable way. I’m sorry to say this, but I’m an amateur when it comes to this. It’ll be pretty disastrous if it were to stab the wrong place.”

Nagato’s dark eyes, which glittered like an LCD screen, looked at the syringe she was holding, and said,

“Is that so?”

She widened her hands again, the syringe once again formed into a whirlpool before morphing into another shape. Seeing the shape of this new object, I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Another object that would create a huge ruckus.”

This time it’s a gun, though it had a small nozzle while its material was made of stainless steel.

Nagato placed the shiny metallic pistol, which looked like a brand new toy-gun onto her palm and handed it to me.

“The chances of this penetrating clothing is very high, but if possible, it is better for you to directly shoot the target’s skin.”

“What about bullets? Does this thing have real bullets in them?”

From its appearance, it looked like an aluminum or plastic gun.

“This is a short-needle gun, the program is infused on the tip of the needle.”

I felt more at ease psychologically with this thing than with a giant syringe. I received the gun and was amazed at how light it was.

“Oh yeah,”

I finally asked the question that I dare not ask a while ago,

“Who is the culprit? Who’s the one that altered the world? If it isn’t Haruhi, then who is it? Can you tell me?”

I heard Asahina-san (big) sigh softly.

Nagato slowly opened her mouth, and without any expression she calmly uttered the name of the culprit to me.

Chapter 5

"……"

I still didn't know what to say. Nagato now turned towards Asahina-san (big),

"Let me give you the space-time coordinates of the target."

"Oh, sure."

Asahina-san (big) stuck out her hand like a loyal dog eager to shake hands with its master.

"Go ahead…"

Nagato softly tapped her finger on the back of Asahina-san's (big) palm, and then retracted it… That's it? Though Asahina-san (big) looked content with it.

"I understand now, Nagato-san. All we need to do is to go and mend 'her' up, right? That won't be hard, since 'she' wouldn't have any powers by then…"

The time traveler seemed determined as she clutched her fists, the alien then said,

"Please wait."

Not wearing any glasses, Nagato said,

"In this state, you too would be swept into the changes of the space-time continuum. Counteractive measures need to be applied."

She then stuck her hand out.

"Your hand."

What for? Does she want to shake hands? I obediently stuck out my right hand. Nagato's icy cold fingers grabbed my wrist, causing my heartbeat to go faster for a while.

"…"

Nagato suddenly moved her sullen-looking face towards my arm.

"Whoa!"

I yelled involuntarily. It was an unavoidable reaction, I guess. Kneeling down, Nagato not only touched my wrist softly with her lips, she even revealed her teeth. It was like during the making of the movie, when she constantly assaulted Asahina-san and bit her.

It didn't hurt, actually. It felt like one of those soft unhostile bites Shamisen would make whenever I caressed him. Though the canine teeth sinking into my skin felt a bit prickly, like being jabbed by something but not hurting at all. Maybe it was because Nagato's saliva contained some sort of anesthetic to numb the pain. It was more like being bitten by a mosquito.

After biting my hand for about five to ten seconds, Nagato slowly lifted her head.

"Your body surface has been applied with a data-manipulating stealth barrier and protective shield,"

Nagato said without even blushing. On the other hand, cupping her mouth with her hands, Asahina-san (big) looked rather amazed. I felt a bit numb and looked at my wrist. On it were two small holes which looked like vampire bite marks. As I stared at them, the two small holes began to heal and disappeared without a trace. Like with Asahina-san during the making of the movie, my body was also injected with Nagato's nanomachines.

"You too."

Under Nagato's request, terrified Asahina-san stuck out her hand.

"…It's been a while since you've injected me. It must've been tough on you, back then…"

"This is my first time giving you an injection."

"Oh, yes, right. I forgot…"

Shutting her eyes tightly, the time traveler stuck out her wrist and accepted the alien's kissing baptism. The time it took for her to be injected with nanomachines was shorter than mine. Once it was over, she began to cough dryly.

"Well, let's go. Kyon-kun, the real thing starts now."

Really? The warm-up this time sure felt quite long! Then again, I was only doing my best to narrate this for everyone, even though I really didn't want to do this.

"Thanks."

I tried to remain calm as I gave thanks to the mistress of the apartment. The silent Nagato remained unresponsive. I could not find any form of self-awareness through her expression. Yet for some reason, I just felt Nagato, who was standing upright, felt very lonely. Was it really because she was lonely as I had speculated?

"Nagato, I'll see you then. Before Haruhi and I arrive, make sure you wait for us in the Literature Club room until then."

Like a doll being injected with life, the alien-created organic being mechanically nodded her head.

“I will wait.”

Such a sentence was enough to ignite a mysterious flame within my heart. Though it was only as bright as a cigarette butt that someone had forgotten to put out. As I was about to figure out where that little spark came from, Asahina-san (big) now said,

“Just to prevent you from getting uncomfortable,”

She tightly grabbed my shoulders.

“Can you please close your eyes?”

I followed as she instructed me to. Asahina-san (big) seemed to be standing right in front of me, holding my hands.

“Kyon-kun.”

This soft chanting sounded just too pleasant. Was she going to give me a kiss?

“Here we go.”

Please, go ahead. You can kiss as many times as you like, the more passionate the better. Just as I was thinking this…

The dramatic dizziness had begun. It was good that I had closed my eyes. Even if I had them opened, it would probably be pitch-black as though there was a power shortage. I now felt like sitting in a roller coaster with my seat-belt taken off; I was no longer sure whether the blood in me had left my body or was rushing towards my brain. The sense of floating weightlessness continued. Though I had closed my eyes, I still felt dizzy. The fact that I didn’t lose consciousness was all thanks to the warmth felt through Asahina-san’s (big) hands.

How many minutes has it been already? Or even how many hours? I lost all awareness of time and space. I can’t hold on much longer. Asahina-san, I feel like throwing up…

As I was ungraciously trying to look for something that I could puke in…

“Um… We’ve arrived.”

The long lost sensation of my feet standing on firm ground was back again. The coldness of the ground passed through my socks and into my body. My sense of gravity was back as well. Like an illusion, the urge to throw up also suddenly disappeared.

“You can open your eyes now. Thank goodness, this is the place that Nagato-san had directed us… And the time as well.”

I lifted my head and saw glittering in the night sky a bunch of winter constellations. As the air was cleaner, the stars were much clearer than in the summer. I turned around and instantly recognized the roof of the North High complex looming above the residential housings.

I looked around me, trying to confirm where I was now. Though it was dark, I couldn’t be mistaken. I was standing here just a few hours ago. I could still remember Haruhi in her ponytail and Koizumi in my PE uniform as well.

This was where Haruhi and Koizumi had gotten changed. It should be a coincidence, I guess!

Now then, what time was it?

Looking at her watch, Asahina-san (big) told me,

“It’s four forty-eight in the morning on the 18th of December. In about five minutes, the world will be changed.”

From the moment I hit the “Enter” key on the 20th and traveled back three years in time, the 18th would be two days ago. On that day, I went to school as usual, unaware of what was about to happen, and I fell into a state of pandemonium as a result of seeing a North High that has completely changed. Haruhi has suddenly disappeared, while Asakura had reappeared; and Asahina-san couldn’t recognize me, while Nagato has become a completely different person altogether.

It all started here, I was now at the time period where the conversion took effect. In other words, I could also prevent it from happening, and that was why I was standing here now.

As I was getting fired up by the intense anticipation……

“Oh no! I forgot to bring my shoes!”

Asahina-san (big) exclaimed softly.

As we traveled directly from indoors, naturally we weren’t wearing any shoes. As expected from Asahina-san, not even the passage of time could wear away her clumsiness.

“Would Nagato-san take good care of them for me?”

Her anxiety briefly relieved me of my own nervousness. I’m sure she’d take good care of them. After all, she managed to preserve a tanzaku for three years. So she won’t lose a pair of shoes so easily. You can always go to her apartment and check her cupboard……

As I calmly thought about these, an electric-like sensation went through my body all of a sudden.

That was because I wasn't wearing any shoes, not to mention having to leap from summer back to the freezing winter, so the cold felt even more intense. I immediately thought of putting back on the jacket I was holding in my arms; that was when I noticed Asahina-san shivering while tightly wrapping herself with her arms. Well, wearing only a long-sleeved blouse and a tight mini-skirt in such low temperatures, I suppose it's only natural that she would be freezing like hell.

"Put this on,"

I placed my jacket over her shivering shoulders. Even I was pleased by my own act of chivalry.

"Oh, thank you. I'm so sorry about that."

There's no need to apologize, it was nothing. If you hadn't waited for me three years ago, I'd never be able to return to here. Just this point alone was enough, even if it meant I had to strip all my clothes for you.

Asahina-san (big) gave me a smile, which perfectly combined sexiness and cuteness, and would soften the legs of more than half of the audience, then said seriously,

"It's almost time."

Maybe it was good that we forgot to wear our shoes, as we didn't make any sound while walking. Despite that, Asahina-san (big) and I still didn't dare to breathe loudly as we walked in small steps towards the entrance of North High. We stopped by the corner and like hunters following their prey, we only stuck our heads out and stared at the path ahead of us in the dark.

There weren't a lot of street lamps in this area, though there was one just outside the gate. Only the area under the light was illuminated. Though the light was dim, one could still make out whoever was standing under that lamp.

"Here she comes……"

A warm hand landed on my shoulder. I could feel Asahina-san's (big) intense yet sweet breathing blow into my ears. Normally, I would be spellbound by it, but I wasn't in the mood right now.

The space-time converter emerged from the shadows and into the light under the lamp.

A North High uniform. That was the person Nagato had mentioned. "That person" was the culprit who had altered our world, separated the members of the SOS Brigade and turned everyone into normal human beings. Only my memories remained, while the memories and history of everyone and everything else were totally changed.

Right now, "that person" had begun making her move.

I still couldn't rush out yet, I had to wait till everything has changed. That was the advice Nagato gave me. I must wait till that person had changed the world completely before I could inject the Restoration Program. Otherwise, the history where I activated the Escape Program would never have existed. I didn't quite understand what Nagato meant, though Nagato and Asahina-san (big) both seemed pretty clear about it. They must be pretty familiar with the flow of time, a person like me would never understand. Since I'll never get it, I might as well follow the advice of the professionals. That Nagato would never lie, she has always been standing by our side with a serious look on her face……

I tightly grabbed the short needle pistol Nagato gave me and waited silently.

Walking in regular strides, "that person" arrived before the gates of North High. She lifted her head to look at the school complex that was shrouded in darkness and stopped.

Her sailor uniform skirt flickered as the wind blew.

She didn't seem to notice us. This was all thanks to the nanomachines Nagato injected into us, creating a stealth barrier and protective shield on the surface of our bodies.

"That person" suddenly lifted one arm and made a gesture as though grabbing onto something in the air. It didn't look natural, it's as though she was being controlled, but I knew that wasn't the case.

"Amazing…" Asahina-san (big) exclaimed, "That was a powerful time quake. She actually had such power… I still find it hard to believe even after I've seen it with my own eyes,"

Even with my own eyes, I still don't see any changes. The night sky was still dark. Yet Asahina-san (big) seemed to have witnessed that person use some method to cause a massive change to the history of this world. She was from the future after all, so it's not surprising if she could see it.

Asahina-san (big) leaned herself tightly onto me. Originally, we too would have been swamped by "that person's" alteration of the world, but we were protected by having Nagato bite us. Nagato and Asahina-san (big) were indeed helpful, it seems the course of action I've taken was correct. What follows next would be the action needed to resolve this matter, I can't afford to screw up at the last hurdle.

I held my breath when I saw that person putting down her arm and suddenly turn her head in our direction. At first I thought she had discovered we were peeking on her, but it turns out she was only looking around.

"Don't worry, she hasn't discovered us. Right now she has been 'reborn.' The time quake… The alteration of the world has ended. Kyon-kun, it's our turn to move now,"

Asahina-san (big) said in a stiff and serious tone and gave me the signal.

I emerged from the darkness and headed towards the school gate. There was no need to hurry, as she was not going to run away. As expected, when "that person" noticed me standing under the street lamp, she was still standing in front of the school gate. The only change was the expression on her face. When I saw the astonished look on her face, I suddenly felt melancholic all of a sudden.

"Hi there,"

I called out to her. As though seeing a friend I haven't met for a long time, I approached her.

"It's me, we meet again,"

I was able to guess a bit from the tone of Asahina-san's (big) voice. Of the people that I knew, besides Haruhi, only one person could make her feel so uneasy. Think about it. After the 18th, the secret personal profiles of the SOS Brigade members had suddenly vanished. Yet all their personalities remained intact, all save one, whose actions, expressions and mannerism had changed completely.

Under the dim night sky, wearing a North High uniform, the tiny figure stood there not knowing what was going on. She didn't seem to understand why she was here, like someone suffering from sleepwalking who had suddenly woken up and begun to look around…

"Nagato,"

I said,

"This was all your doing, right?"

Wearing glasses, it was that Nagato. After the 18th, this Nagato Yuki was just the mere remaining member of the Literature Club, she was neither an alien or any mysterious entity whatsoever, just a very shy bookworm.

The bespectacled Nagato now looked even more astonished, not understanding what was going on,

"…Why… why… are you here?"

"I was about to ask you that, do you even know why you're here?"

"…I'm taking a walk,"

Nagato said uneasily while widening her eyes. The glasses on the girl's face that I was looking at reflected the light of the street lamp. I looked at her like that and thought,

No, it's not like that, Nagato.

This girl was only feeling tired. Having to spend all day being turned around in circles by Haruhi, while busy saving my life, as well as being secretly active in some unknown location behind our backs - it was only natural that she would become fatigued by it all.

A while ago in Nagato's apartment, this was what the Nagato three years ago told us:

"The erroneous files accumulated in my memory database will trigger an anomalous reaction. It can be foreseen that this is unavoidable. On December 18th three years from now, I will reconstruct the world."

She continued calmly,

"There are no counter-measures available, because I do not know how such errors could occur."

But I do.

I know the reason behind Nagato's unexplicable, abnormal action, and just what those erroneous files she had been accumulating were.

It was the most basic desire. Even for an artificial intelligence run by a complex program, even for an android interface who never had such stuff installed, after living for some time, it was natural for her to develop such a desire. You'll never understand, but I do. And probably Haruhi does as well.

I continued to observe Nagato's troubled expression unreservedly. Yet the dream girl from the Literature Club now looked even more uncomfortable. Seeing how helpless she looked, I can't help but yell inside, Nagato! This is what we call emotions!

It is because you were designed not to have any emotions to begin with, the reaction felt from you was far greater. You probably felt like screaming, or going ballistic, or just yelling out loud, You stupid girl! I've had enough of you! Right? No, even if she didn't think that way, what she did was totally understandable. Her actions can be forgiven, because I was partly responsible, after all. I've become too reliant on her, having gotten used to letting Nagato take care of everything. I always thought that as long as Nagato was helping, I could switch off my brain. What an idiot I was, an even greater idiot than Haruhi. So I had no right to condemn her for this.

That was why Nagato - this girl here, came up with the silly idea of changing the world.

So was it an anomalous reaction, or a programming error?

Boy, you sure are annoying, it's neither of the above.

This was what Nagato wished for - a normal world like this.

She only preserved my memories, while altering the memories of everyone else, including herself.

It was now that I finally understood the question that was puzzling me for the last few days.

Why was I the only one to remain unaffected?

The answer was simple, it was because the girl had wanted to let me make the choice.

Is the altered world better? Or is the original one better? Under her well crafted script, the final decision rests on me.

"Damn it,"

To hell with choosing! I never had a choice!

If I had only wanted the SOS Brigade, then I didn't have to return at all. I could just start over in the new world. Haruhi and Koizumi may be studying in another high school, but that wouldn't be too much of an obstacle. We'll just treat it as an out-of-school hobby. This mysterious club can meet as usual at that coffee shop. Over there, Haruhi would come up with some ridiculous stuff, while Koizumi would grin all the time; Asahina-san would look extremely distressed, and I would just look away with a scowl on my face… An image of that scene floated in my mind at once. The Nagato there would probably look troubled as well, of course she would still quietly read her book. Yet still…

That wouldn't be the SOS Brigade that I knew. Nagato isn't an alien, Asahina-san isn't a time traveler from the future, and Koizumi's just a normal person, while Haruhi wouldn't possess any extraordinary powers. It would just be a simple, normal and happy club.

Am I fine with that? Isn't that even better?

How did I think about it at first? Just what did I make of Haruhi's constant trouble-makings beyond the boundaries of common sense?

What a pain.

Enough already!

Are you an idiot!?

I've had enough with you!

"……"

My heart began to hurt.

A normal high school student who was forced to take part in many troublesome situations, constantly complaining to Haruhi yet still managing to live to tell the tale. That was the role I've been playing all along.

Now then! Yes, Kyon! I'm talking to you! I've got to ask myself a very important question, so listen carefully and answer me. You can't refrain from answering. Just a single "yes" or "no" would do. Now listen up, here comes the question:

Don't you find such a weird and extraordinary school life fun?

Hurry up and answer, Kyon! Think carefully. Well? Can't I ask what you think of this? Hurry up and tell me. In a world where I was being turned around in circles by Haruhi; attacked by aliens; hearing a time traveler explain wild theories; putting up with the philosophical babble with an esper; trapped in a Sealed Dimension where giants go on a rampage; living with a cat that speaks; making an incomprehensible leap through time; not to mention having to follow the strict rule of not letting Haruhi know all of these, allowing the commander of the SOS Brigade to happily continue her pursuit of mysterious events, while completely oblivious that she has made a huge mess.

Don't you find such a world interesting?

Or did you think that was just too annoying, and had wanted to tell her enough is enough? Since you've always thought she was an idiot and had decided to ignore her. Well? Is it true? In other words? Is that what you really think?

That world was hardly interesting at all.

Are you sure? According to what you said, you find Haruhi in the original world to be very annoying. No matter what wild ideas she would come up with, you would always feel melancholic. Of course it's natural that you wouldn't find such a world to be interesting. And don't tell me it's not true! You know it is.

Yet, in reality you're secretly enjoying all of this. Because that world is interesting.

You ask me why I say that?

Then let me tell you why,

Didn't you hit the "Enter" key?

You know, the one for the Emergency Escape Program that Nagato left for you.

Are you ready?

The answer you gave for that question then was a resolute "yes."

Am I right?

Our Great Goddess Nagato went far out of her way to create a stable world for you, and you had to turn down her offer. Ever since you met Suzumiya Haruhi back in April, you've taken that idiotic world for granted. You actually want to return to a crazy world where aliens, time travelers and espers wander freely in school. Why is that? Aren't you the one who was complaining all the time about how woeful you are?

If that were the case, then why didn't you ignore the Escape Program? By choosing to stay in this very normal world here, you'll know Haruhi, Asahina-san, Koizumi and Nagato as ordinary high school students, and lead a happy life as usual under Haruhi's leadership. Since Haruhi doesn't have any powers, you could say goodbye to all those surreal experiences.

In that world, Haruhi would just be a normal girl who likes to boss people around; Asahina-san would no longer have the attribute of being a time traveler from the future, she would just be a very cute character; Koizumi would be a normal high school student without any backing from some mysterious 'Organization'; and Nagato would just be a timid and humble bookish girl, not having to carry any burden or use any amazing powers to observe or protect someone. Oh yeah, though most of the time she would remain expressionless, she would still laugh heartily at some lame joke, and then blush furiously. Who knows, she could be a person who could slowly open herself up if I spend some time with her.

Such an idyllic life that would be, and yet you have forsaken it.

Just why is that?

I'll ask you one last time. Answer me truthfully.

Do you find Haruhi the troublemaker and the nightmarish events that she causes to be interesting? Hurry up and answer!

“Of course I do,”

I answered as such,

“It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to realize it was fun. So don’t ask me something so trivial anymore.”

If someone had actually said they don’t find that interesting, then that person would be a blithering idiot. His wits would be thirty times dimmer than Haruhi’s.

I mean, there are aliens, time travelers and espers out there!

Just one alone would be intriguing enough, but to have three sorts of interesting characters all at once! With Haruhi included, some powerful force is bound to be triggered. At this rate, I’ll never be bored. If someone had made any objections to that, I think I’d beat him to a pulp at once.

“So that’s how it is,”

I said to myself. You could say I’ve finally been enlightened.

“I still prefer the original world. This world just doesn’t suit me. I’m sorry, Nagato. I don’t like the present you, I prefer the Nagato from before. Besides, I like you better without glasses,”

This Nagato looked at me with a very puzzled face,

“What are you talking about…”

The Nagato Yuki I know would never say something like that.

This girl would have no knowledge of these three days, when I discovered something was wrong up to now. That was to be expected, because this Nagato had just been reborn, and so has never met me. She would have no memory of looking shocked as I barged into the Literature Club.

The only memory this Nagato had was the fabricated memory in the library. Besides that, the memory we share now all happened since she changed the world a while ago.

A few months ago, I was trapped in the grey Sealed Dimension with just Haruhi. According to Koizumi, that was a new world created by Haruhi.

Nagato was probably using that power. Somehow she managed to nick or steal that mysterious power from Haruhi and used it to create this world.

That sure was a convenient power. No matter who it is, they will always have the thought of wanting to start all over, or wishing that things would go back to where it would be favorable for them.

Yet, a normal person would never be able to achieve such a wish. And it was better that they gave up that thought. I myself didn't want to start all over, which was why I returned from the Sealed Dimension with Haruhi.

This incident was caused by the transferral of a god-like omnipotent power from Haruhi to Nagato. Haruhi was unaware of it all, while Nagato lost control and went forward to change the world.

"Nagato,"

I walked towards the stiff tiny figure standing there. Nagato remained motionless and stared back at me.

"No matter how many times I have to say this, my answer is the same. Please return everything to normal, including you as well. Let's live to fight another day in the club room. As long as you give the signal, I'll be there for you. Lately Haruhi hasn't been going astray for no reason now, so there's no need for you to use such an unhealthy power to forcefully change the world. Just keep everything as it is."

The eyes under the glasses betray a sense of fear.

"Kyon-kun…"

Asahina-san tugged at my sleeve and said,

"It's useless trying to explain to this Nagato-san. Because even she has changed. This Nagato-san is just a normal girl without any powers…"

I suddenly thought of something.

The long haired Haruhi in that world called me John. Without any god-like or demon-like powers, she was just an ordinary schoolgirl who barged into North High without hesitation. Her eyes glittered brightly as she showed great interest in my story about the SOS Brigade, while exclaiming, "Sounds like fun!"

Carrying a wide grin at all times, the Koizumi there said he fancies Haruhi. Wearing my PE uniform, the straight A transfer student would show a complicated expression.

Giving me an invitation to join the Literature Club, this bespectacled Nagato would reminisce her fabricated memory together with me. The smile on her face was like the sun rising out of the horizon, I can't help but want to see that smile once again.

I realized I would never see these people again. To be honest, I kind of missed them. It's just that their existences were all fabricated. They were not the Haruhi, Koizumi, Nagato and Asahina-san I knew. It was a pity I didn't get a chance to say goodbye to them, but I've already made up my mind. I want to go back to the Haruhi, Koizumi, Nagato and Asahina-san I knew.

“I’m sorry.”

I took the gun out and pointed it. Nagato instantly froze on the spot, seeing her reaction, I felt extremely criminal. But I’ve come this far, so there’s no point in hesitating.

“Everything would return to normal very soon. We’ll be able to go to many different places again, have our Christmas hot pot, and then go to the mansion in the snow mountain. You can be the Great Detective this time. A Great Detective that could solve the case just when it has occurred, right? That’ll be……”

“Kyon-kun! Look out… KYAA!!”

As Asahina-san screamed out, someone rammed into my back. Thud! A loud shudder caused me to shake, even the shadow under the street lamp was shaking. In that shadow was the silhouette of another person. What the? Who was it?

“I can’t let you hurt Nagato-san!”

I turned my head over my shoulder and saw the pale face of a girl.

Asakura Ryoko.

“What the…”

I couldn’t say anything, as I suddenly felt something icy cold jabbed into my abdomen. It was a flat object that was thrusted deep into my body. So cold. The sense of disorientation far surpassed the sense of pain. Just what was going on? How can this be? Why was Asakura here?

“Hee hee,”

To me, her grin looked like that of an expressionless mask that has suddenly begun smiling. Asakura then backed off from me, pulling out the blood-soaked dagger which she used to stab me.

Losing my balance, I fell to the ground like a spinning top. Standing before me all this time, Nagato’s legs gave in as she slumped to the ground and said fearfully,

“Asakura…-san?”

As though greeting someone, Asakura-san waved the Swiss army knife that was drenched in my blood and said,

“Hi, Nagato-san. Don’t you worry, as long as I’m here, I’ll eliminate anyone that attempts to threaten you. That was the reason why I was created.”

Asakura smiled and continued,

“It is what you have wished for, isn’t it?”

That’s a lie. Nagato would never have made such a wish. She’s not the sort to kill a bird simply because it’s not singing as she wants it to. Absolutely not. As Nagato began to act abnormally, this Asakura that was re-created was also acting in an abnormal way, basically becoming a shadow to Nagato……

Asakura’s shadow slowly landed on my body. Very soon her silhouette blocked out the moon from my vision.

“Allow me to send you on your last journey. As long as you’re dead, everything will be fine. It’s your fault for making Nagato-san suffer in the first place. Does it hurt? I’m sure it does. Better enjoy it while it lasts, because that’ll probably be the last sensation you’ll ever feel,”

The wide dagger was slowly lifted, the tip of the blade was pointed to my heart. I was bleeding non-stop. Is this the end? …I struggled to think as my mind became blurry. I was losing all sense of reality. So, Psycho Asakura, is this your mission? To act as back-up to Nagato Yuki…

The dagger began to move downwards…

In the blink of an eye, a hand stretched out from one side.

“…!!!”

Someone had grabbed the blade of the dagger, and with bare hands as well.

“Who the…?”

Bare hands…!? Where have I seen this before?

My vision was becoming more and more blurry, so I couldn’t tell who it was. There’s not enough light, anyone mind turning up the light? She was standing in front of the bright street lamp, so I couldn’t see her face properly. All I knew was that it was a short-haired girl…wearing a North High uniform…not wearing glasses…that’s all I could see… Koizumi! …Where’s the guy in charge of lighting when you need him!?

“Huh…!?”

Exclaiming softly was Nagato, who was sitting on the ground. Her glasses reflected the brightness of the street lamp, so I couldn’t see her expression clearly. Was it fear? Or was it astonishment?

“Why? But you’re…!? Why…”

Asakura yelled. She seemed to be talking to the girl who caught the blade with her bare hands, but the girl remained silent and said nothing.

Asahina-san sounded as though she was right next to me,

“I’m so sorry… Kyon-kun, I should have known, but still…”

“Kyon-kun! Kyon-kun…… No! You can’t!”

There seems to be two Asahina-sans. One was the adult Asahina-san, while the other was the Lolita Asahina-san that I knew. Both had tears all over their faces, and were shaking my body. Hey, both of you, that hurts…

…Huh? What was Asahina-san (small) doing here? While I could still understand the adult Asahina-san holding me in her arms and crying, since she came here with me to this time period; but just where on earth did the little Asahina-san come from? Ah, I get it now. It’s one of those illusions, a recollection of one’s whole life as one reaches the end of his life…

Now this was scarier than the feeling of pain and seeing blood flow non-stop out of your body.

Damn it, I’m about to die.

As I wallow in regret for not having written a will, I felt someone appear above me. That person lifted me and picked up the needle-gun that Nagato made that had dropped to the ground.

A familiar voice, yet I could not remember whose, spoke,

“Sorry about that. I have my reasons for not rescuing you right away, but don’t hate me for it. After all, it was painful for me as well. Anyway, we’ll take care of the rest. No, I already know what to do now, and you will as well. So go get some sleep for now.”

What’s he talking about? And who was he talking to? Do what? And who’s taking care of what? The images of Asakura’s fatal strike, the bespectacled Nagato supporting herself with her arms while kneeling on the ground, the two Asahina-sans, and Haruhi in a different school uniform had all now been fused together…

I gradually fell unconscious.

Chapter 6

Swish, swish

A swishing sound whisked past my ear.

As I slowly regained my consciousness from the darkness, my mind began to think groggily.

Maybe it was a dream. From what I can recall, it seemed like a very interesting dream. Usually when you wake up, you would find a dream interesting for about five minutes. But when you begin to brush your teeth, the details start to become blurry, and by the time breakfast is ready, you'll have forgotten about it completely. By the time you realize it, all that's left in your mind is the impression "that sure was an interesting dream." I've already gone through this experience many times.

There were also times when I've had dreams that were hardly interesting, but the details were crystal clear, and remained etched in my mind for quite some time. Maybe those were dream-like experiences, just like that night when I was trapped in the Sealed Dimension with Haruhi, an experience that had really occurred, but had subconsciously been treated as non-existent.

That was the first thing I thought of when I opened my eyes.

The ceiling was white; I wasn't in my own room. The translucent orange sunlight dyed the walls, which were as white as the ceiling, all sorts of colors. I wondered if it were morning or evening.

"Oh my."

For a mind that had just started to become clear, this voice sounded as pleasant as church bells would sound to a faithfully religious person.

"You're finally awake. Seems like you were sleeping quite comfortably."

I turned my head to find the owner of the voice. There sat the fellow on a chair next to my bed, using a kitchen knife to slice the apple in his hand. Swish swish- The apple skin smoothly peeled off and hung downwards.

"Normally I would say good morning, but the sun's setting right now."

Koizumi Itsuki revealed his gentle smile.

Koizumi placed the sliced apples into the tray and placed it on the table by the bedside. He then took another apple from a paper bag and smiled as he said to me,

"Thank goodness you've finally woken up. I was really at a loss for what to do. Ah… Your eyes look quite confused. Do you recognize me?"

“I was about to ask you that. Do you know who I am?”

“What a strange question. Of course I do.”

It was easy to tell which Koizumi this one was just by looking at his uniform.

He was wearing a navy blue suit and not the black gakuran.

It was the North High uniform.

One of my arms was placed outside the blanket. On top hung a bag with some fluid injected into it. I looked at that thing and asked,

“What day is it today?”

Koizumi revealed an expression that, for him at least, was one of astonishment.

“Is that the first question you’ve asked after waking up? It seems like you have an idea of your own situation. As for your answer, it is now past five in the afternoon on the 21st of December.”

“Twenty-first huh…”

“Yes, today is the third day since you went into a coma.”

The third day? Coma?

“Where is this place?”

“A private hospital.”

I took a look around. It was an impressive single-bed ward, and I was sleeping in the bed. For me to actually check in to a single-bed ward, my family must be quite rich, and I never realized.

“A friend of my uncle happens to be the warden of this hospital, so you get special treatment when you check in here.”

Turns out my family isn’t rich after all.

“Well, thanks to the intervention of the ‘Organization,’ you can stay here cheaply for a year with no questions asked. That said, I’m relieved that it only took you three days to wake up again. No, no, it has nothing to do with money. My superiors basically tore me apart for allowing something like this to happen to you while under my watch, and I even have to prepare a letter expressing my remorse.”

Three days before the 21st would be the 18th. What was I doing on that day? …Ah, I remember. I was near the verge of death due to massive blood loss, and so they sent me to hospital… No wait, something wasn't right.

I anxiously looked at the hospital gown I was wearing, then placed my hand on my right abdomen.

I could feel nothing. Normally a wound would feel numb, but it hardly even itched. It would be impossible to recover from such a wound in three days, unless someone patched me up all the way from scratch.

"What was the reason for my hospitalization? Because of my coma?"

"So you've forgotten. Well, guess I can't really blame you for it, since you took quite a heavy knock to your head."

I touched my head. All I could feel was my hair, there was no bandage or any protective netting on it.

"What's amazing is that you didn't suffer any external injuries nor any internal bleeding. Your brain functions were working normally as well. Even the attending physician was baffled. They didn't know what was wrong with you."

"But…," Koizumi continued,

"We witnessed how you fell down the flight of stairs. It sure looked horrible back then. To be honest, I think our faces all went blue. The sound of you crashing to the ground was so loud that I wouldn't have been surprised if you'd fallen unconscious for good. Would you like to know what happened?"

"Go ahead."

Accordingly, as I was walking down the stairs of the club room complex, maybe I tripped or something, I just tumbled downwards and landed with my head on the ground. Wham! I then stopped moving.

The way Koizumi described it sounded as though it really did happen.

"Things were pretty chaotic after that. We had to call the ambulance and get an unconscious you to the hospital. Suzumiya-san's face was all pale, and it was the first time I ever saw her look like that. Oh, the one calling the ambulance was Nagato-san. It was her calmness that saved your life."

"How did Asahina-san react?"

Koizumi shrugged his shoulders and said,

“She reacted the way you would expect. She grabbed hold of you and cried as she kept calling your name.”

“So what time on the 18th did all that happen? Which stairway was it?”

I fired my questions in quick succession, since the 18th was the day the world changed drastically and I went into a state of panic.

“You even forgot about that as well? It was right after noon, just after the SOS Brigade had finished its meeting. It happened just as the five of us were about to go out to buy something.”

Buy something?

“You don’t even have memory of that? Are you sure you’re not faking your amnesia?”

“It doesn’t matter, please continue.”

The smile on Koizumi’s lips became gentle.

“The agenda for the meeting, hmm, was for what to do on Christmas Day. Suzumiya-san said there was a party for little kids near her place, and the SOS Brigade would make a guest performance there. This was so that Asahina-san’s Santa costume could be put to good use. She would dress up as a gorgeous Santa girl and hand out presents to the kids. This merry event was all organized by Suzumiya-san.”

Here we go again; that girl can be so reckless!

“Yet, it wouldn’t be realistic just to have a Santa girl. So Suzumiya-san decided to let one of the members dress up as a reindeer and carry Asahina-san into the scene. In the end we had to draw lots… Who do you think was the lucky winner? Do you remember now?”

I have absolutely no recollection of it at all. If one could remember something that doesn’t even exist in his memories, then he is an impressive liar. He would need to be checked in to another hospital. Though it was useless telling Koizumi about this.

“Never mind, just know that you were the lucky one. As we had to make a reindeer costume for you, we had to go out to buy some materials, and it was when we were walking down the stairs that you fell.”

“Now that sounds really stupid for me.”

Hearing me say that, Koizumi raised his eyebrows.

“As you were walking at the back, no one really saw how you fell. We only saw you falling from the side like this,” Koizumi demonstrated by deliberately letting the apple tumble off his right hand before catching it with his left, “You basically tumbled over and over.”

Koizumi continued to peel the apple skin.

“We quickly rushed towards you, who had become motionless. Suzumiya-san said she felt there was someone at the top of the stairs. She saw someone’s skirt just at the corner there, but it disappeared thereafter. I found it strange as well, so I did some research. At that time, there was no one else in the building besides us. Even Nagato-san shook her head. That girl just disappeared like a phantom. We’ve been waiting for you to wake up all this time so we could ask you who it was that pushed you…”

I didn’t remember that. At that moment, I was sure that would be the most appropriate answer. It was just a normal accident. I was careless, all I could say is tough luck for me. I guess I’ll leave it at that.

“Only you came to visit me?”

Where was Haruhi? I had wanted to ask, but in the end didn’t. Yet Koizumi still chuckled and said, “You’ve been looking around all this time. Are you looking for someone? Don’t you worry, we’ve been taking turns looking after you. Before you opened your eyes, there was always someone by your side. I think it’s about time for Asahina-san to arrive.”

I was unsettled by Koizumi’s gaze; he looked as though he was meeting a friend that actually believed his April Fool’s joke, and was lost for words. What was he trying to insinuate?

“Oh, nothing really. I was just feeling envious of you. You could say those were envious looking eyes.”

Why are you saying this to a patient that has knocked his head?

“While we regular members have to rotate to watch over you, the Commander sees it as part of her responsibilities to worry about the safety of her members…”

Koizumi elegantly peeled off all the skin from the apple, then sculpted it into a rabbit shape before placing it on the tray on the bedside table.

“Suzumiya-san has been here all along, since three days ago she has never left this place.”

I turned towards the other side of the bed where Koizumi was pointing.

“…”

And there she was.

Wrapped tightly inside a sleeping bag was Haruhi, her mouth slightly agape as she snoozed away.

“We were all worried about you, both her and I.”

He sounded so sad; it felt like some soap opera.

“You should’ve seen how distressed Suzumiya-san looked… No, we’ll leave that for next time. Anyway, isn’t there something you need to do right now?”

Why does everyone like to order me around!? Asahina-san (big) was like that, now even this Koizumi… But, I didn’t begrudge them. And I couldn’t care less if all those apples sliced by Koizumi were an offering to some deity.

“Yeah,” I said.

I really felt like drawing on her face. Maybe next time, I’ll have all the time to do that.

I sat up straight and stretched my arm to touch that seemingly angry looking face of hers.

Her hair wasn’t long enough to tie a ponytail yet. I quickly felt nostalgic about her long hair. As if to spite me, that short dark hair of hers began to move.

Haruhi had woken up.

“…Umm…hmm?”

Haruhi moaned as she struggled to open her eyes, and by the time she realized who was pinching her face…

“AH!?”

She tried to leap up at once, but failed miserably as she had forgotten she had zipped herself inside the sleeping bag, and so she rolled and crawled about like an inchworm. Eventually she managed to get herself free, proceeded to point a finger at me and started cursing,

“Damn you Kyon! Why couldn’t you notify me first before waking me up!? I wasn’t even mentally prepared!”

Now that’s asking for the impossible. Yet seeing you yelling and cursing was more effective than any medicine for me.

“Haruhi.”

“What?”

“Wipe your drool.”

Haruhi's face twitched for a while, she quickly rubbed her mouth, and then stared at me with that scowl of hers,

"You… Are you sure you didn't draw anything on my face?"

I was tempted to.

"Hmph. Well, don't you have anything to say?"

I gave her a reply that she would expect,

"Sorry to make you worry."

"Well, I'm glad you are. After all, worrying about the well-being of the brigade members is one of the responsibilities of a commander!"

Haruhi's cussing sounded like heavenly singing. At that moment, a soft knock emitted from the door. Koizumi instinctively got up and pulled the door open.

As the third visitor standing outside the door saw me,

"Ah, ahh, aaahhhh…"

She proceeded to make a series of frantic sounding noises. Standing there with a vase in her hands, was none other than the second year North High schoolgirl with her long hair, a cute child-like face, and a slim yet well-grown figure.

"Hey… Asahina-san, hi there,"

I wasn't sure whether I should say long time no see, for me at least I couldn't tell.

"Sniff……"

Tears started to trickle from Asahina-san's eyes,

"Thank goodness… Oh… Thank goodness…"

I really wanted to embrace her like last time, who knows, Asahina-san was probably thinking the same thing. Though she seemed to have forgotten to put down the vase, and only stood there crying.

"Aren't you overreacting a bit? He just knocked his head and fainted. I knew all along that Kyon wouldn't sleep like this forever."

A sense of gratefulness could be heard within Haruhi's voice, and she continued without even looking at me,

“As I’ve already mentioned before, the SOS Brigade works 365 days a year without rest. Nobody is allowed to take a day off. I’ll never accept a lame excuse like bumping one’s head and going into a coma for sick leave, absolutely never. Do you understand, Kyon? The price for going AWOL for three days is very high. You’ll be fined! Not just a regular fine, but an overdue fine on top of that as well!”

Koizumi began chuckling, Asahina-san’s giant tear drops trickled endlessly to the ground, while Haruhi turned her face away. At first glance it would seem that she looked mad.

I looked at them and then nodded my head and shrugged my shoulders,

“All right then, including the overdue fine, how much do I need to pay in total?”

Haruhi stared at me, the smile on her face was beaming so brightly that it was hard to believe she was mad a while ago. She really is a very simple girl.

In the end it was decided that I would have to pay the bill for everyone in the coffee shop for three consecutive days. As I pondered whether to terminate my existing time deposit…

“One more thing…”

There’s more?

“Yup, I still haven’t gotten around to compensation for all the trauma you’ve caused. Ah yes, Kyon, for the Christmas party, you can dress up as the reindeer and perform some spectacular stunts for us. You have to play until you get all of us laughing! If it’s too boring, I’m gonna have to kick you to an alternate dimension! You’ll need to do that as well for the kids’ party. You hear!?”

With a gaze as bright as the light from a prism, Haruhi once again began ordering me about.

While I was now fully awake, it didn’t mean I could get discharged right away. After the doctor came to have a look at me, I was sent to be examined on all sorts of machines, it was so complicated and annoying that it felt as though they were trying to remake me into a cyborg. After spending a whole day on all sorts of body checks, I was going to have to spend the night in the ward again. For me, tonight would truly be my first night in the hospital, and since I’d never been in a hospital, I might as well experience what it felt like.

Haruhi, Koizumi, and Asahina-san were just about to leave when my mom and sister came to visit me. Haruhi sounded very courteous as she spoke to them, I never knew she could be this polite, so it was kind of surprising.

As I spent time chatting with my mom and sister, my mind was occupied with various thoughts.

If things continued the way they were, what would've happened next? Nagato, Koizumi, and Asahina-san would just be regular human beings without any supernatural background whatsoever. Nagato would be a silent bookworm from the Literature Club, Asahina-san would be an unreachable beautiful upper classman, while Koizumi would be a normal transfer student studying in another school.

And Haruhi would probably just be an eccentric high school student.

Perhaps under such settings, an interesting story can be written as well. There would no longer be any need to learn about the truth of this world, nor would there be any need to worry about any changes caused. It would just be a normal story without any connection to this dysfunctional world.

I probably wouldn't play any role in that story. All I could do there was just peacefully live my normal high school life and graduate without incident.

Which world would I be happier with?

I think I know the answer to that now.

It was only in this "present world" could I be happy. Otherwise why would I risk losing my life just to come back to this world?

What about you? Which world would you choose? I'm sure the answer would be pretty obvious. Or am I the only one who would think like that?

After my family went home and the lights in the ward went out, I could only stare at the ceiling. As I had nothing better to do, I decided to close my eyes.

For the past three days, in this world that is, I was told I had spent all that time sleeping.

In that case…

If the world had become like that, that meant that it'd been changed.

This world had already been changed twice. The world that was distorted by Nagato had changed once again to the original world as it is now. So who was it that made the second change?

It couldn't be Haruhi. For those three days, Haruhi didn't have such powers, and the Haruhi of this world didn't even know the world had changed.

Then, who could it be?

Saving my life by catching Asakura's blade with her bare hands, there could only be one person with the ability to do such a thing…

That would be Nagato.

Besides, before I lost consciousness, I saw two Asahina-sans. The second one wasn't the adult Asahina-san, but my senpai Asahina-san. She was none other than the cute upper classman from the future that I was very familiar with.

There was another person, the mysterious voice that spoke to me near the end. I knew I'd heard that voice before.

I tried to recall who it was, but very quickly I realized I didn't even need to try.

That was my own voice.

"I see, so that's how it was,"

In that case…

I would have to travel back to that time period again. The time would have to be early morning on December the 18th, and I had to go with the Asahina-san and Nagato of this time period.

Only then could the world be restored to its present state.

Asahina-san would be responsible for bringing me and Nagato back to that time period, while Nagato's mission was to amend her past self, who had gone astray for the past three days. Though I wouldn't know whether she would use Haruhi's powers or the powers of the Integrated Data Sentient Entity.

I too had a role to play in this as well.

That's what I thought anyway. If I hadn't heard my own voice speaking back then, I wouldn't be here today. In order to preserve my present existence, I would need to go back and say the same thing to my past self,

"Sorry about that. I have my reasons for not rescuing you right away, but don't hate me for it. After all, it was painful for me as well. Anyway, we'll take care of the rest. No, I already know what to do now, and you will as well. So go get some sleep for now."

I repeatedly memorized these lines in my head. That's what I said if I recalled correctly. While I couldn't guarantee that it'd be correct word for word, the meaning should be the same.

In place of the me who got stabbed by a dagger, the one using the needle-gun would be my destined role.

As for the reason why I couldn't save my past self from being stabbed by Asakura, I understood that as well. From the tone of my future self's voice, I didn't sound like I ran over in a hurry. I must have hidden somewhere nearby before hand. Asahina-san and Nagato also came out cue on time. It couldn't be too early, nor could it be too late. I had to wait until I got stabbed by Asakura. Why was that? Because of my past self, that was something that had already happened. To quote Asahina-san,

"This is a predetermined event,"

It was now late at night, but I wasn't in the mood to sleep.

I was waiting. Waiting for what, you ask? Of course I was waiting for the only person among the people I knew who had yet to visit me. It'd be a joke if she didn't come.

I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling all this time. It was only late in the night, when visiting hours were long over, that my patience was rewarded.

The door to the ward slowly opened, the light from the corridor revealed the shadow of a tiny figure on the floor.

Standing there was the figure of the last person to come visit me, Nagato Yuki.

As usual, Nagato said without any emotion,

"I am responsible for everything that has happened."

For some reason, I felt nostalgic at hearing this calm voice.

"My punishment is currently being assessed."

I lifted my head and asked,

"Assessed by whom?"

"The Integrated Data Sentient Entity."

Nagato said calmly, as though it had all happened to someone else instead.

Of course, Nagato had long known she would create a ruckus on the morning of December 18th. Because I had gone to visit Nagato three years ago with the adult Asahina-san. She knew all along, and she tried her best to prevent it from happening. Yet there was no way to stop the tide. Sometimes even if you knew what was about to happen, you just couldn't avoid it. No, it was possible to avert it…

I suddenly thought of the behavior and mannerisms of Nagato after summer, which were slightly different from before,

“But,” I interrupted her, “If you knew you were going to go astray three years ago, you could’ve told me any time, couldn’t you? Whether it was after the school festival, or before the baseball tournament. In that case, I would’ve been able to take action earlier in that specific time on December 18th. Then all that would’ve needed to be done would be to call everyone out and travel back to three years ago again,”

Nagato’s expression was as cold as ice, there was hardly a smile,

“If I had told you beforehand, my astray self would still have been able to erase all your memories concerning the incident and change the world. Besides, no one can guarantee that something that hasn’t happened will ever occur. The best I could do was to keep you in your original state when December 18th arrived.”

“Didn’t you leave an Escape Program for me? That was more than enough already!”

As I was thanking her, I began to grow angry. But I wasn’t angry at Nagato, neither was I angry at myself.

The blank voice echoed through the walls of the ward,

“I cannot guarantee that I won’t go astray again in the future. As long as I continue to exist, my internal errors will continue to accumulate. This is a very dangerous possibility.”

“BULLSHIT! Relay this message for me.”

Hearing me swear, Nagato’s head tilted back about two centimeters. She even blinked.

I reached out and grabbed that little white arm of hers. Nagato did not resist.

“Tell this to your boss, so listen carefully. If he ever thinks of letting you disappear, then I’m going to let all hell break loose. I’m going to get you back, no matter what it takes. I may not have any powers, but I’m pretty good at provoking Haruhi,”

I did indeed have a trump card in provoking Haruhi. All I needed to do was tell her, “My name is John Smith.”

That’s right. While my powers were as good as a useless bum, that idiot Haruhi happened to possess enormous powers. Once Nagato disappeared, I would tell everything to that girl until she believed me. And then we would embark on our journey to rescue Nagato. Even if Nagato’s boss hid her away or eliminated her, Haruhi would always think of some way to turn the tables, at least I’d make her think of a way. Who knows, Koizumi and Asahina-san may even lend a hand. By then, who would give a damn about some Data Entity from some unknown corner of the universe!? What difference did it make whether that thing existed or not!?

Nagato was our friend. And if someone from the SOS Brigade was to go missing, Haruhi would never let the matter rest. And it wasn't just Nagato, if Koizumi, or Asahina-san, or I had suddenly left, even by our own will, that girl wouldn't give us up so easily. She would resort to anything to bring us back. That's Suzumiya Haruhi, the pushy, self-centered, inconsiderate and troublesome Queen of the SOS Brigade for you.

I stared furiously at Nagato,

"If your boss even tries to do anything funny, then I'll join up with Haruhi and transform the world completely. We'll create a world similar to the one in those three days, where you exist but the Integrated Data Sentient Entity doesn't. I'm sure they'll be even more disappointed if that happens. Observation target? Observation my ass!"

My anger intensified as I spoke.

I had no idea how sentient the Integrated Data Entity was, but he should've been pretty smart. He was probably one of those that could calculate pi to the hundred millionth decimal point in just two seconds and do all sorts of advanced tricks.

If that was true, then I have to tell him something.

I'm sure it would be a piece of cake for you guys to give Nagato a more human-like personality. Before she became a psychotic killer, Asakura was quite popular in class, not to mention being open and friendly. She'd even call out some classmates to go shopping together during holidays. If you could create someone like her, why must you set Nagato as a lonely little schoolgirl sitting and reading a book all by herself in the Literature Club room? Are you thinking that if her personality wasn't set that way, then it wouldn't look like a Literature Club, that she wouldn't attract Haruhi's attention? Who made such a decision anyway?

At this point I noticed I was clutching Nagato's hand strongly. Yet the book-loving Interactive Humanoid Interface did not begrudge me at all.

Nagato simply looked straight at me, and then slowly nodded her head,

"I will relay the message."

The calm voice then softly added,

"Thank you."

Epilogue

I began to contemplate what I should do next.

The end-of-term assembly was over, and I obtained my term report card from Okabe-sensei, thus my high school life for this year had come to an end.

Today was December 24th.

The vanished Class 1-9 and its students had all been resurrected, including Koizumi, who didn't appear much in this story. Asakura had disappeared from Class 1-5 over half a year ago; Taniguchi continued his giddy mood of being in love; the seat behind me had once again been occupied by Haruhi; and there was no longer any flu epidemic in class. When I saw Nagato in the assembly hall, she wasn't wearing glasses. After the end-of-term assembly, I bumped into the sisterly duo of Asahina-san and Tsuruya-san, who waved and greeted me simultaneously. I also confirmed this while on my way to school this morning - Kouyouen School had now been restored as a prestigious private girl's school for the rich and famous.

The world had been restored to its original state.

Yet, the choice to keep this world remained with me. I still had to go back with Nagato and Asahina-san - back to the morning of December 18th. If I didn't, the world would never be restored. Only by going back could restoration be possible. The thing is I still hadn't decided when I should go back. I had yet to explain all this to Asahina-san. She'd probably hear it from her future adult self. I did see her in the past few days, but I did not mention a single word to her.

"Damn!"

After moaning meaninglessly, I embarked upon the corridor leading to the club room complex.

Like a racing car, I would have to follow the golden rule of coming back to the starting point. It didn't matter whether I was lagging by two or three laps, that wasn't for me to decide anyway. The road and the scenery of the first lap and the final lap were the same, yet they carried different meanings. All I needed to do was to be careful not to get myself eliminated, and safely reach the finishing point so the checkered flag could be waved.

……Forget it, it's pointless trying to say anymore.

It was no use trying to justify my actions as it was I who made the decision to return to this side. It was different to Haruhi's thoughtless rampages, this decision was my own free will, I have thus chosen to be spun around meaninglessly.

In that case, someone needed to carry that responsibility and see things through to the end.

That person wasn't Nagato, it wasn't Haruhi either, but myself.

“Serves me right……”

I began to lapse into self-pity and made a cool pose. It didn’t matter if someone saw me, since no one would bother looking anyway. As I was thinking that way, I exchanged glances with an anonymous high school girl who was walking by. Very quickly she turned her eyes away and scuttled off. I said softly to her back a greeting which she probably couldn’t even hear,

“Merry Christmas.”

If this were the last episode of a soap opera, shiny white snow crystals would begin falling, and the protagonist would catch one in his palm and exclaim, “Ah!” Or something like that. Looks like there’s no hope of a White Christmas this year. Today’s weather sure was surprising, it was actually a fine day.

As a result, I became one of the main characters. A bystander would have already disappeared into the far corners of the galaxy by now, and become a relic of the past.

“So, now what?”

It was only now that I realized this. I really didn’t know what to do. There’s no doubt about it, I belong here. I realized that long ago. From the day Haruhi dragged me to the Literature Club room and I heard her declare indefinite occupation of the place, I had become part of this bunch already.

Like the other members of the SOS Brigade, I would stand on the side actively protecting this world. No one made me do this, I raised my hand out of my own will.

In that case, there’s only one thing I need to do.

It was easier to get up after falling on something instead of falling flat on the ground, though both involve falling. Let me rephrase this, I’ll have to go back and pick up my other self who had fallen down. From the outcome, I can say it’s for my own good.

I walked up the stairs while focusing on today’s upcoming activities. Haruhi and Asahina-san were in charge of buying the ingredients. I was spared the pain of being a human shopping cart, thanks to my being hospitalized. I didn’t think this had anything to do with Haruhi being merciful, on the contrary, she’s probably keeping the menu secret until the final moment, where she’d surprise everyone - that’s what I thought anyway. Maybe she’d even use her experience from the lone island to hold a cheap and big “Hotpot in the Dark Christmas Party.”

I wondered what ingredients were being used. As Haruhi was the chef, she’d probably prefer something stimulating and exciting. Who knows, she may have come up with an experimental hotpot, never before seen in the history of human cuisine. Still, no matter what was being boiled in the pot, it should be edible once cooked. Even Haruhi wouldn’t be dumb enough to put something she couldn’t digest into the pot. Though it’d be another matter if she had the stomach of a monster. Haruhi might be eccentric, but I’m sure her stomach’s made of the same stuff as a

normal human's, right? The only thing beyond human standards would probably be that brain of hers.

However, before having the hotpot party, I still had to dress up in a reindeer costume and provide some sort of entertaining performance. You can't even imagine how it feels to have to think of what the show would include.

"Yare yare,"

The sigh of depression that I sealed away just last month, had once again come out of my mouth. Now don't be so picky! They may sound the same, but what I say may have different meanings if you interpret it differently.

I gave myself an excuse for reusing this phrase, while jotting a must-do predetermined event down in the diary in my head.

This predetermined event was something I had to do if I wanted to continue staying in this world.

I have to find a time in the near future to go back and restore the world.

As I approached the club room, I could smell the food coming to my nose. That was enough to make me full. Where did this sense of satisfaction come from? I was supposed to go back to pick up the mess some time later, yet I was already feeling so satisfied before I even made my move. Now wasn't I a bit too easy to satisfy!?

Ah well, it's not too bad. Before then,

There was still time. The one in charge of the operation would be the me in the future, though it was neither the me from the distant future, nor the me from the next moment.

I grabbed the doorknob of the Literature Club room and asked the world a question,

Hey, mind if you wait for a while? Before I go back to have you restored, can you just wait a little longer?

At least……

Until after I've tried out Haruhi's hotpot. It shouldn't be too late to go after that, right?

Author's Notes

In place of my own views, I'm going to write about one of my memories, so please bear with me.

I had a classmate in sixth grade, who could pretty much be called a genius. He was the leader of the class, with a bright mind, good family background, and he was really good at creating a cheerful atmosphere for everyone. The reason this extremely popular classmate, with a dazzling saintly glow above his head, befriended me was because we shared the same interests. We both loved fishing and reading foreign suspense novels.

Whenever the class needed to be split into teams, I would always end up with him, with him being the team leader, of course. Once, when the school was having a festival, each class was required to send a representative to perform for the whole grade's leisure. Our team was at a loss on what to perform, as our wits came to an end, he would say, "Let's write a play." And he would then begin writing the script. I will never forget how hard I laughed and even rolled on the floor when I read that script, I never knew something that funny would exist!

Our performance faithfully kept to his comedic script. After watching our play, the whole sixth grade laughed, even the teachers were laughing. Our team eventually won the gold prize, we were even given a wooden shield sculpture as a reward. I can still vividly remember what sort of character I was playing.

Later on, we both entered the same junior high. But he would go on to enroll in some high school far away, and followed by some university even farther away.

I kept thinking to myself, could I ever make everyone laugh uncontrollably like he could? I also wondered whether his script had changed my life……

That thought had taken root in my mind and became entrenched in my memory.

……Looks like there's still room for more. Might as well write a second reminiscence.

When I was in high school, I was briefly a member of the Literature Club. As I was also a member of another club which I took priority in, I could only go to the Literature Club once a week. The Literature Club only met on Mondays anyway, since the only members were myself and a girl one year my senior. When I knocked on the door for the first time, I saw her in her glasses, looking very knowledgeable. That was the sole member, and also the president of the Literature Club. I had completely forgotten what my upper classman had said to me back then, she probably never even said a single word.

After joining for a while, we began to work on a periodical published by the club. I really don't feel like recalling just what I wrote in it, I just know that it wasn't novels. I was in charge of the cover illustration as well, which I'm not keen on recalling as well. It wasn't possible to fill up the pages in the periodical with just the two of us, so sempai called up some of her friends to write some articles. Though they were all people I didn't know, one of their names left a deep impression on me, to which I still remember to this day.

As sempai was approaching third year, she decided to quit the club to concentrate on her studies. At the same time there were five new members coming in. I wasn't too sure why there were that many coming in. I was having so much fun in the other club that I soon stopped going to the Literature Club.

The next time I saw sempai was on her graduation day. I have no recollection of what we said then. We probably just had some friendly chatter, and then she faded from my memory. The last I saw of her was her back as she walked off.

As to what that sempai's name was, I could never remember. She probably doesn't remember my name as well. But, I'm sure she would still remember that a person like me existed in her club back then.

Because I too remember a person like her existed in the club back then.

……After wasting the whole Author's Notes section on two seemingly fictional and inappropriate reminiscences, I sense how low I must have fallen. In perspective, excavating some old funny memories was nothing, there were other things that were giving me such a headache that I think I'm going to collapse……though I realized all things would eventually get sorted out, but it was a useless act, kind of like being a football that had fallen into a stream, wondering where the river would take it. Might as well put my energy somewhere.

Finally, I would like to thank the publishers, everyone involved in the publishing of this book, and to all readers my most sincere thanks. May we meet again.

—Tanigawa Nagaru

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